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MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

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EJLER JAKOBSSON
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Science Editor

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ARNOLD E. ABRAMSON
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Associate Publisher

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LETTERS 2

This is the second six-month report to the consumers—you—covering your reactions to matters bigger than both of us: what *Galaxy* prints, should print and should not. The action has been honest, hectic and highlighted, of course, by the serialization of Robert A. Heinlein's *I Will Fear No Evil.*

Some thoughtful reader evaluations have come in.

Dear Jakobsson:

As all dangerous visions must, I Will Fear No Evil *is bound to touch off an endless controversy. Although I do not believe the literary quality of the new novel equal to that of* Stranger in a Strange Land, *I realize that it does carry Heinlein farther into his exploration of the only human dream worth pursuing: the realization of new life styles in which one may relate to other human beings freely, openly, and in a manner which totally integrates both sensuality and spirituality.*

Heinlein is not a young man. Old Johann Sebastian Bach Smith is, in a sense, Heinlein himself, while Eunice is the hope of a glorious, liberated future which Heinlein is struggling to grasp. The struggle is not an easy one; never before has the New deviated so radically from the Old. Yet Joan Eunice is a unique fusion of these two quite opposite forces. As literature, the novel is flawed (more on this in a moment), but as autobiography it is moving.

Flaws. Most obviously, a common Heinlein tendency carried to the extreme: too much talk and not enough action. A novel like this needs many tasteful yet explicit *sex scenes (D. H. Lawrence did it in* Lady Chatterly's Lover*—few achieve it, but it is not impossible). Heinlein is on the verge of great things, but he's going to have to set aside a little more of his self-consciousness in order to break on through. For instance, Joan Eunice's last words were truly heartbreaking—but who's responsible for those damned dashes after the f's?* [Mr. Heinlein is not —nor am I. The real story may never be told; but remember, there are distributors, retailers and local ordinances to deal with. —Ed.] *That's only going halfway and halfway measures do not constitute a breakthrough.*

But let's give Heinlein credit for tackling what is undoubtedly the most difficult job of characterization in modern fiction. I hope we can look forward to more serious and honest attempts to realize this vision of a joyous human frontier. A long and happy life to Robert Heinlein! May he grow in wisdom and courage.

Thomas R. Smith
River Falls, Wisconsin

Dear Sir:

Have you noticed levels in Heinlein's new book? One: Old man dreams it all on his deathbed. Two: Imagines Eunice to give alien body identity. Three: Eunice survives biologically in body (unlikely!).

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Four: Eunice arrives as spirit associated yet with her body (the literal interpretation).

Roger C. Lewis
Owatonna, Minnesota

Dear Sir:

As for the final installment of Mr. Heinlein's novel, I Will Fear No Evil, *one can only say, pity poor Long Beach. I cannot deny that the likes of the Reverend Thomas Barker do and probably will exist. But to suggest that the once famed Iowa State Picnic (even now fading into obscurity) will, by the time of the story, be able to mount even one rape is taking science fiction and speculative gerontology too far.*

D. J. Waldie Jr.
Long Beach, California

Dear Sir:

Galaxy was one of my favorite sf magazines and Robert Heinlein one of my favorite authors.

Now Heinlein has descended to subtle pornography in I Will Fear No Evil, *as well as becoming endlessly boring—couldn't stomach finishing his serial. Many of your stories now seem selected with an eye to socialistic and left radical slants. You have both lost me for good.*

M. K. Johnson
Omaha, Nebraska

I hope you find it, Mr. Johnson —the good, that is.

The letters in the above early sampling of views are presented *in toto*. More of these later as space permits. This report now spills over into some ground-covering sketching:

1. A quick, overall reply to those who were curious and those who theorized other answers: I found the book brilliant, challenging and highly pertinent on many levels. To enumerate them here would be pointless—it's your ball now.

2. It's inconceivable to me that anyone except Robert A. Heinlein could or would have written *I Will Fear No Evil*. That's my response to those of you who have written to ask: *what if someone else had done so?*

No one else did.

3. I also find it inconceivable that, having read the manuscript, I should not have made every effort to secure *I Will Fear No Evil* for first publication in *Galaxy*.

Every worthwhile magazine makes its own demands of an editor and *Galaxy* has a long history of being true to and reflecting the best in science fiction responsive to its times.

This obligation covers a vast range of taste and talent, puts a certain emphasis on what science fiction has to say on top of the endless argument as to what science fiction is. It requires an exploratory approach—and dialogue.

So far, your comments—pro and con—regarding *I Will Fear No Evil* have been highly informative. The same applies to your reactions to Robert Silverberg's *Urban Monad 116* series. All this constitutes the dialogue we must have. The conjunction of the works

(Please turn to page 139)

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TO FIT THE CRIME

I

THE pot-bellied, graying man walked down the corridor to the psychiatrist's stateroom, one of the two such rooms in the interstellar vessel. He stood in the open door, then tapped lightly to get the man's attention.

"You wanted to see me, Doctor?"

"Yes, indeed, Dr. Crowell. Come in and sit down."

"Thank you." Crowell sat on the edge of an overstuffed chair. "Syzygy. Aardvark, devil-worship. Gerund."

Crowell blinked one long slow blink. Then he looked down at his belly in amazement. Experimentally he took a thumb and forefinger-ful of abdomen and pinched. "Ouch! Why didn't they have this old boy take off some weight before I got stuck with his persona?"

"Necessary to the image, Otto."

"Otto—yes, it all comes back

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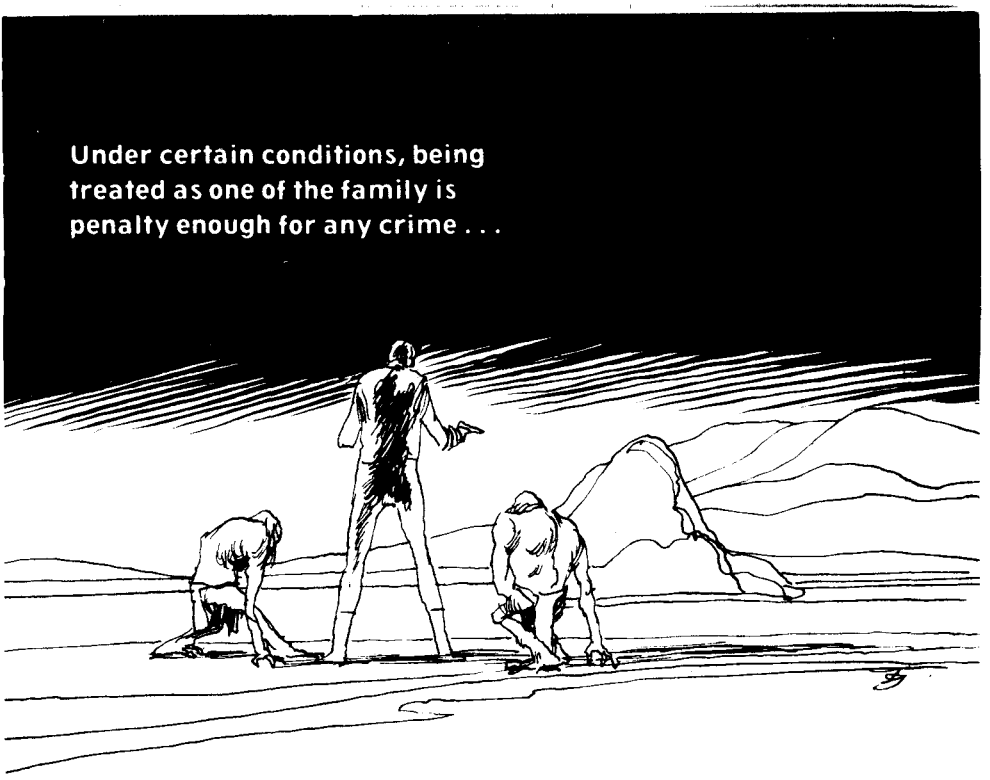

JOE W. HALDEMAN

now. I'm Otto McGavin, a—"

"Wait." The psychiatrist strode to the stateroom door and eased it shut. "Continue."

"I'm a prime operator. A prime. For the TBII. And you are no more a psychiastrist than I am Dr. Isaac Crowell—you're Sam, uh, Tibitz. Used to be a section leader when I was stationed on Springworld."

"That's right, Otto—you have quite a memory. I don't think we met more than twice."

"Three times. Two cocktail parties and a bridge game. Are you my briefing officer for this job?"

"Right." Tibitz reached into an inside vest pocket and pulled out a long envelope. He broke the plastic seal and handed it to Otto. "Five-minute ink," he said.

Otto scanned the three pages quickly and then read slowly from beginning to end. He handed it back just as the printing was starting to fade.

"Questions?"

"Okay. I'm fat old Crowell. Or I

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will be when you push me back through the mnemonic whatsis. May I assume I can speak the language as well as he could?"

"Probably not quite as well—there aren't any learning tapes for Bruuchian. Crowell's the only person, prior to your indoctrination, who ever bothered to master a Bruuchian dialect. You were under mutual hypnosis with him for five weeks, learning it. Throat sore?"

OTTO reached to touch his adam's apple, recoiled when he hit a flabby jowl. "God, this guy's in lousy shape. Yeah, I feel a little tickle. Why?"

"The language is mostly growls and belches. I learned a stock phrase in it; it goes like this . . . " He made a noise like a lovesick rhinocerous.

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

"It's in the same dialect you learned, a stock greeting in the informal mode: 'Clouds are not for your family/ May you die in the sun.' Of course, it rhymes in Bruuchian. Almost everything rhymes in Bruuchian; every noun ends in the same syllable, a protracted belch."

"They say I'm pretty good at languages. Don't know how long I'll be able to keep that one up, though. I'll be hoarse after half an hour's small talk."

"No. You'll remember when you get back into the Crowell persona. There're some lozenges in your baggage kit that make it easier on your throat."

"Look, I hope this job won't call for any action. I've had fourteen personality overlays before this one, but I never had to carry this much plastiflesh around. That report said Crowell hadn't been on the planet for ten years—why couldn't they trim me down a little and say I'd gone on a diet?"

"Too risky, you might run into some recent acquaintance. Besides, part of the job is for you to look as harmless as possible."

"I don't mind looking harmless—but in one point two gees I'm going to *be* harmless. I worked up a sweat just walking down the corridor here—and this is earth-normal."

"We have confidence in you, Otto. You primes always come through in a pinch—"

"—or die trying. It's that damn hypnoconditioning."

"Now, Otto. You know it's in your own best interests."

"Yeah, like poor old Carruthers."

Tibitz shrugged. "So he only has one natural limb left. He claims he enjoys the freedom of being able to choose the prosthetic to fit the job. He's happy."

"He's happy, all right. Last time I saw him, he passed me in the hall playing pattycake with left arms screwed into both shoulders. Happy."

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"Well, he's not really a prime operator any more, either. He just carries the title as a courtesy."

"And what about ol' Radar-eyes?"

"Sleep." Otto slumped back in the chair and started to snore lightly.

"Otto, when I awaken you, you will be about ten percent Otto and ninety percent your artificial personality overlay, Dr. Isaac Crowell. You will remember your mission and all of your training as a prime operator, but your initial reaction to any normal situation will be consistent with Crowell's personality and knowledge. Only in stress situations will your reactions be those of a prime operator. Gerund. Devil-worship. Aardvark. Syzygy."

Crowell/McGavin awoke with a start. He pulled himself out of the chair and winked at Tibitz. In Crowell's gravelly voice: "Thank you very much, Dr. Sanchez. The therapy was most soothing."

"Think nothing of it, Dr. Crowell. That's what the ship pays me for."

"THIS is an outrage! Young man, do you know who I am?"

The customs inspector tried to look even more bored than usual. "Says here," he peered at the microfiche viewer that held Crowell's ID capsule, "that you're Isaac Crowell, Ph.D., out of Macrobastia, born on Terra. You're sixty years old and you look seventy. That don't get you past the strip-down inspection."

"I demand to see your supervisor."

"Sorry, he ain't in today. We got a little brig that you can wait in till tomorrow. I ain't callin' him up on his free day just for some shy offworlder."

"Now, now—what seems to be the trouble?" A stocky little man with a foppish hairdo minced up. "Isaac! What brings you back to Bruuch?"

Crowell clasped the man's hand —the palm felt like a woman's thigh —and searched artificial memories for a fraction of a second until the face clicked. "Jonathan—Jonathan Lyndham. And how is Deirdre?"

Lyndham sighed. "As ever. I swear she's out carrying a sign somewhere this very minute." Deirdre was a lumpy Earth-mother type who, being childless, had adopted the natives of Bruuch and was forever crusading to better their lot. "But you—have you returned to stay this time?"

"I don't know, Jonathan. This gentleman doesn't even want to let me through the turnstile. Unless I do some sort of a—a striptease."

Lyndham glowered at the inspector. "Smythe—don't you know who this man is?"

"He's—nossir."

"Doctor Isaac Sebastian Crowell," he intoned, "author of

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Anomaly Resolved, the book that put this planet on the regular spacelanes."

Actually the book had sold well enough on Bruuch and on Euphrates, where the colonists faced a similar situation with regard to exploiting a native population (and were looking for an excuse for slavery); but it had been a bust nearly everywhere else. Fellow anthropologists felt that Crowell had been sloppy and let sentiment interfere with objectivity.

And as for being on the regular spacelanes, Bruuch was served by one cargo ship a week, passenger vessels if and when.

"Here, let me see those papers." The clerk gladly handed over the clearance forms. Lyndham scrawled initials in appropriate places. "This is no common smuggler . . . without the influence of his book, you would probably be working in the mines instead of shuffling papers once a week." He pushed a button and the turnstile buzzed. "Come, Isaac. The Company will buy you a drink to atone for this cretin's stupidity."

Crowell squeezed through the turnstile and followed Lyndham to the spaceport bar. The place was furnished with native handcrafts, tables and chairs carved out of the dense black iron-wood that resembled obsidian more than it did any other Terran product. Crowell had difficulty drawing the chair out from the table. He plopped himself down and mopped his red face with an outlandishly large handkerchief.

"Jonathan, I don't know if I'll be able to get used to this gravity again. I'm not a young many any more."

And ten percent reminded itself, *I am twenty-seven and in superb physical condition.*

"You'll get used to it, Isaac. I'll enroll you in our health club—we'll shrink those extra pounds off in no time."

"I don't know that I'll have time," Crowell said hastily: *No amount of exercise will reduce plastiflesh.* "My publisher just sent me here to gather material for a revision of *Anomaly*. I doubt that I'll be here more than a month."

"Oh—that's a pity. But I think you'll find that things have changed enough to warrant a longer stay than that." An overdressed, dumpy waitress clumped over. She had a wad of something tucked in the side of one cheek. "You fellas want something to drink?"

"Brandy, please. Do you still drink brandy, Isaac?"

"Yes, indeed. With soda, if you please." The girl nodded and walked away, masticating.

"Changes? We hear very little of Bruuch on Macrobastia, where I've been teaching. I can see ten years have brought *some* changes—" with an economical gesture he indicated the bar. "When I left last time this port was only packed earth and a metal hut. But I'm in-

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terested more in the true Bruuchians than in colonists. Are things much the same with them?"

Lyndham pursed his lips. "Um—not really, Isaac."

The waitress brought drinks, one neat and one mixed. She gave each man the other's order and stumped away without a word. The men switched and Crowell took a long swallow with obvious relish.

"No brandy in the Confederation like Bruuchian. A pity you don't export."

"The Company's supposed to be working on that. That and the native handcrafts." He twitched his shoulders in a little shrug. "So far just lots of talk. Kilogram for kilogram, they can make much more on rare earths. Every planet makes beverages and most have busy autochthones."

"Yes, the natives—things have changed?"

JONATHAN took a small sip of brandy and nodded. "Both in the long view and, well, recently. Have you heard that the natives' average life span is down?"

Otto McGavin knew but Crowell shook his head, no.

"In the past six years, down some twenty-five per cent. I think the average life expectancy of a male is down to about twelve years. Bruuchian, that is—about sixteen Terran. Of course, they don't seem to mind."

"Of course not," Crowell mused. "They would view it as a blessing." The Bruuchians preserved their dead in a secret rite and the carcasses were considered living creatures, with more status in the family than anyone who was still moving around. They were consulted as oracles, the eldest living family member divining their advice by studying the corpse's immobile features.

"Any theories?"

"Well, most of the males work in the mines; there is some bismuth associated with the rare earth deposits; bismuth is a powerful cumulative poison to their systems. But the mineralogists swear there's not enough bismuth in the dust they breathe to cause any appreciable health problem. And of course the creatures won't let us have a body for autopsy. It's a sticky situation."

"Quite so, I can see. But I recall the Bruuchians enjoyed small doses of bismuth as a narcotic—could they have simply found a large source and be on a species-wide orgy?"

"I don't think so . . . I've looked into the matter rather closely—God knows, Deirdre's always harping about it—and they simply don't have the technology, even the most basic grasp of science, to extract or concentrate bismuth from any natural source. The Company doesn't mine it and it's against Company law to give any to a native even if you could find

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any. No, I really think the bismuth poisoning is the wrong tack."

"That's strange." Crowell tapped a finger on the table, gathering his thoughts. "Except for that one metabolic quirk, they seem quite a hardy people. Could it be overwork?"

"No possibility, absolutely none. Ever since your book came out there's been a Confederation observer, a xenobiologist, keeping track of the creatures." Crowell winced microscopically every time Lyndham referred to the natives as "creatures." "Every one of them that works in the mines has a serial number tattooed on his foot. They're logged in and out and not allowed to spend more than eight hours a day in the mines. Otherwise they would, of course. Strange creatures."

"Yes, I noticed that when I first came here. It was the original stimulus for my research. In the home, they're placid, even lazy. In places defined as work areas they'll routinely labor to total exhaustion. It seemed, well, anti-survival. Took nine years' work to find the answer."

THE Otto part of his brain was getting impatient. *The disappearances?* "You said something about recent changes?"

"Um." Jonathan fluttered his hands and he took another sip. "It's really quite distressing. You know, we still have only about five hundred people on this planet."

"Oh? I had hoped that there would be more by now."

"Company doesn't encourage immigration. No jobs. Anyhow, everybody knows just about everybody else; and we like to think that we're a pretty close-knit group. More like a family than just people with a common employer. Anyhow, people have been . . . missing, disappearing over the past few months. The food supply is pretty closely managed; since humans can't survive on native food and all meals are accounted for, the missing people are presumed to be dead. But all of them disappeared without a trace. Three people, to date. One of them the supervisor of mines. Quite frankly, the general consensus is that the creatures did away with them for some reason—"

"Incredible."

"—and as you might imagine, a good deal of bad feeling has been brewing. Several of the creatures have been killed."

"But—" Crowell sputtered, then sat back, took a drink and spoke calmly. "There is absolutely no way a Bruuchian can take a human life. They don't have the concept of killing for food. And as much as they revere their dead and aspire to be a 'still one,' they can't grasp the idea of murder or suicide—or even euthanasia. They don't have words for these things. I remember a time when a drunken

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worker killed a clumsy Bruuchian with a shovel. I had to go to the village and find the proper household, to try to explain. But the news got there before I did and the household was in a delirious state of celebration. Never had so young a one passed into stillness—they regarded it as a special favor from the gods. Their only concern was to recover the body and preserve it and two of them were out on that chore as I arrived. When I told them that a man had done it, they thought I was jesting. Men are close to godhood, they said, but men are not gods. I tried to explain it over and over from different directions, but they only laughed. Finally they called in the neighbors and had me keep repeating the story for their edification. They regarded it as a wonderfully blasphemous joke and it was told and retold for years."

Crowell emptied his glass in a gulp.

"I can't say I disagree with you—the accusation is absurd. But they are powerful creatures and a lot of people are growing afraid of them."

"Well, this will certainly be my first, most urgent area of research." Crowell levered himself out of the chair. "No, don't get up. I can find my way to Transients."

"Well—you know where to get in touch with me."

"Still in Supplies and Disbursal?"

"Yes, indeed." Lyndham smiled. "I'm at the very top now. Chief of Incoming."

"A belated congratulations," Crowell said. *Very interesting*, Otto McGavin thought.

II

THE two-wheeled cart lurched to a stop and Crowell got out gingerly, heavily. He gave the native who had pulled him over a mile a small coin of Company money and said in the formal mode: "For your labors/ this small token."

The native took it in a large trifurcate hand and placed the coin into his mouth, tonguing it to the voluminous pouch under his chin. He answered ritually, "May your body soon find the softness/the wisdom and ecstasy of stillness." Then he scooped up Crowell's baggage and carried it toward a door marked: Transient's Billet #1.

Crowell watched the native jog ahead of him with more than a little envy as his large frame lumbered down the walk. The Bruuchian had a coat of short brown fur, now slightly misted with sweat. From the rear he resembled a Terran gorilla.

His immense splayed feet were larger versions of the hands, with three mutually opposable toes. His legs were short in proportion to his body, with high knee joints that allowed movement some 45° from the perpendicular in both

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directions. Thus his gait had a cartoonish character, amplified by the fact that his arms dropped straight from outsize shoulders to within a few centimeters of the ground. There was nothing comic about his frontal aspect, though; with two huge glaring eyes that never blinked (through a transparent nictitating membrane slid up and back every few seconds) and the cluster of low-definition eyespots that, being sensitive to infrared, allowed him to find his way in almost total darkness. A huge mouth was covered by a single flap of a lip, which rose frequently to show a set of improbably large molars. He had ears that would resemble a cocker spaniel's, except that they were hairless and heavily veined.

This particular specimen sported two concessions to his human employers: a pair of striking earrings and a loincloth concealing nothing of any conceivable interest to a human being. He also spoke two words of Terran, yes and no. That was about average.

The native was in and out of the building before Crowell had huffed his way halfway there. He ran around Crowell without a word, harnessed himself to his cart and ambled off, a nightmare-comic jinrikisha.

Crowell went into his billet and sank onto the spartan bunk. He had lived in more elegant surroundings. There were a crude table and chair of native manufacture, an unimaginative print on the wall showing a winter scene on Terra, a military-type locker and shower operated by hoisting a bucket with holes punched in the bottom to head level. Another bucket evidently served to transport water from some distant point to a washbasin below a cracked mirror. There were no other sanitary facilities and Crowell assumed the outhouse he remembered from ten years earlier was still in use.

He was debating whether to recline on the bunk (he wasn't sure he could get back up) when someone tapped on the door.

"Come in," he said wearily.

A GANGLY young man with a small beard, wearing khaki shorts and shirt and carrying two bottles of beer, stepped diffidently to just inside the door.

"I'm Wâldo Struckheimer," he said, as if that explained everything.

"And you bring greatly needed succor," Crowell rumbled. It had been a dusty ride.

"I thought you might appreciate something to drink," he said, loping across the room in two steps, offering a beer and standing about six heads over the seated Crowell.

"Please—" Crowell bobbed his hand in the direction of the native

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chair and took a large swallow of beer while Waldo was folding himself into a sitting position. "Are you also a transient?"

"Heavens, no," said Waldo. "I'm the xenobiologist in charge of the natives' welfare in the mines. And you, I understand, are Dr. Isaac Crowell. It's a pleasure finally to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you." Waldo took another drink. They made polite noises for a minute. "Dr. Struckheimer, I've only talked to one other person since I landed this morning. What he said was very alarming . . ."

"About the disappearances?" Waldo frowned.

"That, too, but what concerned me most was the rapid decline in Bruuchian life expectancy. The theories I heard this morning weren't too impressive—do you have any ideas?"

Waldo put his fingertips together. "Well, my first idea was bismuth poisoning; I suppose you heard about that. They do show most of the clinical signs, but they're common ones—like nausea or shortness of breath in humans. I mean, I would still strongly suspect bismuth poisoning if I had any idea where they could get it. But since we first learned it was toxic to them—I guess that was before you left—nobody's been allowed to bring bismuth onto the planet."

"And you don't think there's any

Ballantine Books

WE are getting to be a Very Big Corporation—something that was brought home at the Spring (January) Sales Conference where Editorial valiently presented a six-month list (of something between 50 and 60 titles per month), including of course Beagles and our new West Coast line, Comstock Editions. The festivities closed with an organic food supper—featuring natural grain alcohol—which was a smash.

Enough.

•

SINCE this column is technically meant to trap you into buying books, we'll get on to a.f. and s.f. titles for March. A real goodie is Joy Chant's RED MOON AND BLACK MOUNTAIN—our second original Adult Fantasy—a powerful first novel which has already been compared with Tolkien which in fact it is totally unlike except perhaps in stature. It is neither gothic, like GORMENGHAST, nor comfortably wholesome, like the Professor. RED MOON AND BLACK MOUNTAIN is wild, savage, magical, the first fruit of a major talent.

READ IT.

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ALSO this month, two interesting cerebrations from Douglas R. Mason—HORIZON ALPHA—a violently exciting variation on the theme of layered cities, and DILATION EFFECT, a tense and moving fugue—really two separate love stories experienced by the same (well, not quite) couple. A very good book indeed . . . which, incidentally beautifully demonstrates Mason's developing skill as a writer.

•

IN this month, one of our favorite nuts, Augustus Mandrell, appears in three books—two reissues, one new. Pick them up if you've missed them before. OF ALL THE BLOODY CHEEK, RATHER A VICIOUS GENTLEMAN, and (new) FOR MURDER I CHARGE MORE. These are **not** mysteries—but if you liked Dr. Strangelove, Mandrell is for you. And at last, we do SOMETHING ABOUT EVE, by James Branch Cabell, originally announced last Fall, but postponed because our dauntless leader disliked the cover featuring a flirtatious nude with a feathery bottom. Well, **chacun à son gout** and who are we to argue. On which fascinating note we close for this month.

À bientôt. BB

way it could be coming from the mines here?"

"No. All the bismuth in ten cubic meters of that lanthanide ore wouldn't give a Bruuchian even a slight buzz. I've come to think it's just a red herring; something else is causing similar symptoms."

"Any recent change in, well, their dietary habits, for instance?"

"No, they still herd those meat-bearing reptimammals, and I've run a continuing analysis on the flesh pods they harvest from them. Nothing unusual. No bismuth, certainly."

Both men sat in silence for a moment. Crowell said, "Looks as if I may have a bigger job ahead of me than I had anticipated. My publisher sent me here to update the book for a new edition—I expected only to gather a few statistics and renew some old friendships." He knuckled both eyes. "Quite frankly, the prospect of footwork is appalling. I'm not a young man any more and I weigh twenty kilos more than I did last time I was here. Even then I needed Gravitol to get around comfortably."

"I'm sure the Company doctor—you remember Dr. Norman—will prescribe you some. I use it myself when the days get too long." He fumbled in a shirt pocket and brought out a small vial. "Here, have a couple. I get it free."

"Many thanks." Crowell put the

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two tablets under his tongue and washed them down sith a swig of beer. A feeling of lightness and well-being pulsed through him. "Ahh—potent stuff." He stood without difficulty for the first time since he had been Otto McGavin. "Could I impose on you for a tour of your lab? That would seem to be a logical starting place."

"I'd be delighted—I planned to stop by there this afternoon anyhow. Let's try to catch a taxi."

WALDO saw a jinrikisha a couple of blocks away and gave a piercing whistle. The driver saw them and ran down the street as if his life depended on it.

He came to an abrupt stop and showered dust on both men. Then he grunted one syllable: "Where?"

"Take-us-toMine-A-please."

The Bruuchian gave a disarmingly human nod.

Mine A was a mile away. The ride was somewhat terrifying but otherwise uneventful.

"Is that your lab?" Crowell indicated a large silver dome as he beat the dust from his clothes.

"Yes, indeed. Here, follow me and by all means stay on the path. Wouldn't want to step in a dustpit."

No, wouldn't want to do that, Otto/Crowell thought as he carefully matched the xenobiologist's steps. *Most of them are only about a meter deep—but slide into one of the big ones* and you're gone. . .

With their infrared-sensitive eyeclusters the natives could detect the dustpits plainly by temperature differential. But to human eyes the surface of a pit looked just like the surrounding dusty ground.

Nearing the lab, Crowell heard the chugging of an air compressor. The dome wasn't metal after all, but aluminized plastic, kept inflated by air pressure. That was something new in Company buildings. They went through a flapdoor in the side.

The air inside was sweet and cool. "Compressor pushes the air through a humidifier and a bunch of dust filters. I think the Company added that touch to induce me into free overtime. It works—I always hate to leave the place."

The lab was an interesting combination of rustic and ultramodern. Every piece of furniture was the familiar Bruuchian design, but Crowell recognized the crinkly-gray box of an expensive general-purpose computer, a caloric oven, a large-screen electron microscope and a lot of complicated-looking glassware that had to be imported. He saw several arcane devices he couldn't identify.

"Very impressive—how did you ever get the Company to finance all of this?"

Struckheimer laughed. "The Company just paid for the building—hard enough to get that! I've

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got a Confederation grant from the Public Health Commission. I'm the Company's veterinarian for six hours a day and the rest of the time I do research on Bruuchian physiology. Or try to do research—I'm pretty limited without cadavers or even exploratory operations."

Crowell nodded. "How do you get volunteers—for whatever you do?"

"Oh, I hire them. Bruuchians have developed a taste for some human luxuries, like jewelry and hardware, and they can only get them at the Company store. I pay them exactly what they would get working in the mines—as you know, that's not much. They stay here in a little room," he indicated a partition with his thumb, "and I do quantitative bioanalyses on them—you know, weighing and analyzing food intake and waste products. I X-ray them and do organ traces—"

HE STROKED his beard and stared at nothing. "It's very strange. They have several internal organs that don't seem to have any real function. Not all of them even have the same set of organs. And if they do they aren't necessarily the same place in the body cavity. If *only* I could get a cadaver!" He pounded his palm with his fist. "I —there was a horrible accident a few months ago. A native fell in front of a mining laser and it sliced him in two. As soon as I heard I came running. But the relatives had already spirited him away. I took an interpreter and found his family's hut in the village. I told them I could sew him back together again, that I could cure him. God, I wanted to get a look at that body!"

He kneaded his forehead with two fingers. "They believed me. And they apologized. But they said they had thought he was ready for stillness and they had already 'processed' him. "I asked if I could see his body and they said, sure, they were happy that I would *want to join the celebration.*"

Struckheimer paused again. He stared at Crowell and said, "You know that room, the family room, where they keep their ancestor's mummies? I went in there—must have been thirty or forty of them leaning against the walls, three and four deep, perfectly preserved. They pointed out the new arrival. He looked just like all the others, except for a hairless circle around his middle where the laser had cut through. I looked at the ring of skin closely—they let me use a flashlight—and there was absolutely no seam, no scar! I checked the serial number on the foot and it *was* the right one. Now, believe this: the cadaver couldn't have gotten there ten minutes before I did. That kind of scar suppression takes induced skin regeneration —weeks of convalescence—and

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you can't do it on a dead organism. But try to find out how they do it—you might as well ask a person how he keeps his heart beating. I don't think they really understand the question."

Crowell nodded. "When I wrote my book, I had to be satisfied with a simple description of the phenomenon. All I could find out was that it involves some ritual using the oldest and the youngest family members. And nobody teaches them what to do. They say it's obvious. But they can't explain and they won't let you watch."

Struckheimer went to a big freestanding refrigeration unit and came out with two beers. "Stand another one?" Crowell nodded and he uncorked both of them. "Make it myself—one of the native boys tends the brew for me. Going to lose him in a few months, though—he's almost old enough for the mines."

He handed Crowell a beer and sat down on a little stool. "I suppose you know they don't have anything like a study of medicine. No shamans or anything. If somebody gets sick they just sit around and cheer him on—and if he recovers they offer him their condolences."

"I know," said Crowell. "How do you ever get them to come around for treatment? And how can you know what to do for them when they come in, for that matter?"

"Well, my medical assistants—I've got four—inspect each one of them when they go into the mine and again after they've finished work. The Public Health Commission designed a cybernetic remote diagnostic machine, similar to the one a doctor uses. There are four of them, all wired into my computer over there. It checks out their respiration rate, skin temperature, pulse and such; and if there's any significant difference between two consecutive readings my assistants send the fellow to me. By the time he gets here the computer has filled me in on his medical history and I can dope out some empirical remedy based on clinical experience and the physiological experiments. I never have any idea whether the remedy is going to reduce the symptoms. A drug will work perfectly on one of them and on the next the symptoms will just get worse and worse until he curls up and dies. And you know what they say about that."

"Yeah—he was ready for stillness."

"Right—they tolerate the treatment only because it's a condition for employment. They'd never come on their own."

"Have the diagnostic machines given you any clue as to the reason they're dying off so much younger than before?"

"Oh, sure. Symptoms, in a statistical sense. For instance, the av-

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erage respiration rate has increased more than ten percent since we started taking readings. Average body temperature is up almost a degree. That supplements my clinical data; both together led to my original conclusion that it was cumulative poisoning. Bismuth would fit the data nicely—it all accumulates in one organ and is never excreted. And it has to be something associated with the mines. You know, they keep careful demographic records; the families with the greatest number of recent additions to stillness have the most political power. It turns out that the life expectancy of those who don't work in the mines hasn't changed a bit."

"I didn't know that."

"The Company doesn't like it spread around."

They talked for another hour, Crowell mostly listening, Otto developing a plan.

IT WAS almost dark when Crowell treaded up the walk to the doctor's office. The Gravitol had worn off and he was feeling miserable again.

The doctor's office had the first modern furniture, a conservative chrome-and-plastic desk and the first pretty girl Crowell had seen on the planet. The girl sat behind the desk.

"Do you have an appointment, sir?"

"Uh—no, ma'm. But I'm an old friend of the doctor's—"

"Isaac—Isaac Crowell! Come on back and say hello." The voice came from a little intercom on the girl's desk.

"Last room down the corridor to your right, Mr. Crowell."

Dr. Norman met him in the corridor and steered him to a different room, pumping his hand. "It's been so long, Isaac—I heard you were back and frankly, I was surprised. This is no planet for oldsters like us."

The doctor was an affable giant; red-faced and white-haired. He took Crowell into what were obviously his living quarters, a two-room apartment with a carpet and lots of old-fashioned books on the walls. When they entered, music started playing automatically; Crowell couldn't identify it, but Otto knew: "Vivaldi," he said without thinking.

The doctor looked surprised. "Finally getting an education in your old age, Isaac? I remember when you thought Bach was just a kind of beer."

"I'm finding time for a lot of things now, Willy." Crowell eased his bulk into an overstuffed chair. "All of them sedentary."

The doctor chuckled and strode into the kitchenette. He put ice into two glasses, measured brandy into each and splashed soda into one, water into the other.

He handed the brandy and soda

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to Crowell. "Always remember a patient's prescription," he said.

"As a matter of fact, that's one thing I dropped by for." Crowell took a sip from his drink. "I need a month's supply of Gravitol."

The smile went off the doctor's face and he sat down on the couch, putting his drink down without sampling it. "No, you don't, Isaac. A week's supply would be plenty. Then you'd be stone cold—dead."

"What?"

"Obesity is a contraindication; at any rate, I never advise Gravitol for people over fifty-five. I never take it myself any more. It would strain the old ticker."

My heart is twenty-seven years old, McGavin thought, *and it's carrying around an extra thirty kilos. Think, think!*

"Is there some less potent drug that'd help me get around in this gravity? I've got a lot of work to do."

"Hmm—yes, Pandroxin isn't nearly as dangerous, but it should give you a measure of comfort." He reached into a drawer and brought out a prescription pad. He scribbled a short note. "Here you go. But stay away from that Gravitol. It would be pure poison to your system."

"Thanks. I'll get it filled tomorrow."

"Tonight, if you want—the pharmacy part of the Company store's open all night now.

"So—what brings you back to this outlandish place, Isaac? Investigating the change in the Bruchian death rate?"

"Not really—or not primarily. I just came to update my book for a new edition. But that *is* one of the things I'll want to look into. What do you think of the bismuth theory?"

Willy waved a hand in the air. "Hogwash. I think it's overwork, pure and simple. The little bastards work hard all day in the mines; then they go home and knock themselves out carving on that tough wood. You don't have to look any farther than that."

"They always have seemed hellbent on working themselves to death. The males, anyhow. Somehow, that seems too pat, though—the ones who don't work in the mines are always charging around, too. But they aren't popping off early."

THE doctor snorted. "Isaac, go down tomorrow and watch them work the mines. It's a wonder they last even a week down there. The others look lazy compared to the mine workers."

"I'll do that." How to get the conversation around to the disappearances? "How about the human side of the colony? Changed much since I left?"

"Not really. Most of us got weasled into twelve- or twenty-year contracts; same people around, on-

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ly ten years older. Costs a year's salary to get back to Terra and you forfeit that one hundred percent retirement if you break your contract—so most of us are sticking it out. Had four people buy their way out; I don't think you knew any of them. There's a new Confederation ambassador—like the three before him, nothing for him to do here. But the law says we've got to have one—I understand the diplomatic service considers this the least of all possible worlds and that being assigned here is either proof of imcompetence or punishment for something. It's punishment for this one, Stu Fitz-Jones—he had the misfortune of being ambassador to Lamarr's World when the civil war broke out there. Not his fault, of course, it's just that nobody understood the natives' internal politics. But they had to hang it on somebody, so here he is. You ought to drop by and talk to him—he's an interesting fellow. But go in the morning while he's still a little bit sober. We've had six births, half of them legitimate, and eighteen deaths." Willy frowned. "Rather, fifteen deaths and three disappearances. All the disappearances in the past year. People have been getting careless. Outside the Company city you might as well be on another planet. But people go walking out alone, prospecting or just getting away from the rest of us. They break a leg or step into a dust pit and it's all over. Two of the disappearances were brand-new people, probably Confederation agents—" Otto jumped; Willy was right—"and the other was old Malatesta, the supervisor of mines. I think that's what brought the two agents. They were supposed to be doing mineralogical research but they didn't work for the Company. Who could have paid their way? Nobody else can mine on this planet."

"Could be a University paying for abstract knowledge—that's how I came here the first time."

The doctor nodded. "Exactly. That's what they claimed. But they weren't scholars, I could tell. I lived and worked with academic people most of my life. Oh, they could identify themselves and they seemed to know their subjects adequately, but—you know that zombie thing the TBII is supposed to use with its agents?"

"Vaguely—isn't it just plastic surgery and hypno-learning?"

"Oh, I suppose. Anyhow, that's what I think these fellows were: a couple of agents they'd made to walk, talk and act like geologists. But they went to all the wrong places, like the mines—they've been analyzed and the analyses published down to the last molecule. And they never stuck to one place long enough to get any serious work done."

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"You're probably right."

"You think so? Have another drink. Everybody else around here thinks I'm getting paranoid in my old age."

"Maybe we're both going bonkers together." Isaac smiled. "Thanks for the offer, but I'd better pick up the Pandroxin and be getting back to my place before I collapse of fatigue. It's been a long day."

"I can imagine. Well, good to see you again, Isaac. Still play chess?"

"Better than ever." *Esp cially with Otto's help.*

"Well, drop by some evening after you're settled and we'll go a round or two."

"I'll do that. Take care."

III

ISAAC didn't go to the pharmacy right away.

He went to his billet and made a radiophone call.

"Biological lab. Struckheimer here."

"Waldo, this is Isaac Crowell. Could I ask a favor?"

"Fire away."

"I'm going down to Dr. Norman's office now to get some Gravitol. Those tablets you gave me today seemed just about right—could you look up the dosage?"

"Don't have to look it up—it's five milligrams. But look, Isaac, he'll probably want you on a smaller dose—the older you get, the less they give you."

"Really? Well, I'll try to talk him out of it. Seems to me it should go the other way around."

"You'll never talk ol' Willy out of anything—he's about the most stubborn creature I've ever argued with."

"I know—we were good friends last time I was here. Maybe he'll have pity on a fellow refugee from the geriatrics ward."

"Well, good luck. See you again soon?"

"I'll be down your way tomorrow, checking out the mines."

"Stop in for a beer."

"Glad to."

Crowell emptied his suitcase and flipped up the false bottom. He selected a stylus that was an ordinary ball-feed pen on one side and an ultrasonic ink eradicator on the other. Luckily, the doctor had used a black ball-feed to write the prescription; he wouldn't have to forge the signature.

He practiced writing: "5 mg. Gravitol, quant suff 30 days" a couple of dozen times, then buzzed the Pandroxin prescription into invisibility and scrawled the counterfeit one over the doctor's signature.

The Company store was dark except for one light over the prescription desk. The front door was

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locked and Crowell dragged himself over to a side door. It slid open when he put his foot on the treadle mat. A bell rang.

A clerk came from behind the shelves of reagents, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Something I can do for you?"

"Yes, I'd like this filled, please."

"Sure thing." The young man took it and walked back behind the shelves. "Say," he yelled back, "this isn't for you, is it?"

All Otto now. "Of course not. I use Pandroxin. That's for Dr. Struckheimer."

The clerk came back in a minute with a little green vial. "I could have sworn Waldo was in here for Gravitol just last week. Maybe I ought to call up Dr. Norman."

"I don't think these are for his own use," Crowell said slowly. "They're for some experiment on the natives."

"Okay. I'll just put it on his account, then."

"That's funny. He gave me cash to pick them up."

The clerk looked at him. "How much?"

"How much do they cost?"

"Eighteen and a half credits."

Crowell extracted his wallet and counted out nineteen credits. Then he laid out a pink Cr50 bill next to it.

The clerk hesitated, then picked up the Cr50, folded it and put it into his pocket. "It's your funeral, old-timer," he said as he rang up the purchase. "That's a young man's dosage."

Crowell took the half-credit change and left without a word.

THE next morning, feeling human again, Crowell went out to the mines, just after sunup. He checked at the dome but Waldo wasn't there, so he ambled on down to Mine A.

A long line of Bruuchians waited at the entrance to the mine, dancing and gesticulating as if they were trying to keep warm. The noise of their animated conversation got louder and louder as Crowell approached the front of the line.

A human in white coveralls was examining the lead Bruuchian. He didn't notice Crowell until he was standing right next to him.

"Hello there," Crowell shouted over the din.

The man looked up, startled. "Who the hell are you?"

"Name's Crowell—Isaac Crowell."

"Oh, yeah—I was just a kid last time you were here. Watch this." He picked up a megaphone and shouted in Bruuchian (informal mode): "Your spirit/disrupts my spirit/slowing the progress/of this line and your way to stillness." The conversation quieted to a low murmur. "See, I read your book."

"Clever adaptation. You could be one of their priests."

"They think I *am* one." He con-

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tinued making passes over the Bruuchian's body with a gleaming metal probe.

"Is that the diagnostic machine?" Crowell indicated a featureless black box clipped to the man's belt, with a cable leading to the probe.

"Yeah. It figures out whether anything's wrong with the beastie and tells Doc Struckheimer." He clapped the Bruuchian on the shoulder; the 'beastie' ran off into the mine. The next stepped up and presented his foot, his knee bending in a most unkneelike manner. "It's also a microphone," he said, peering at the number tattooed on the Bruuchian's foot. He read the number off in slow, clear tones and began running the probe over the brown fur in a regular pattern.

"I can't figure anybody getting off this planet and wanting to come back. What are you doing here?"

"Well, there's a new printing of my book coming out. The publisher wants it updated."

The man shrugged. "Long as you get a ticket back, guess it's not so bad. "If you want a look downstairs, go ahead. But watch your step. They run around like crazy down there—keep away from the elevator and they probably won't trample you."

"Thanks." Crowell walked down the corridor to a small open elevator. Inside, one Bruuchian was doing an impatient little dance. Over the elevator, a sign in English read: TWO AT A TIME. Bruuchians had no written language, but this one must have known the rule; as soon as Crowell strapped himself in the native pushed a big red button and the elevator fell abruptly. Crowell hung on while Otto counted dispassionately. Twenty-two seconds passed before the repulsors cut on and the machine squeezed to a halt. Even allowing for air resistance, they must be over a kilometer deep.

THE PLACE was very dark. The Bruuchians did not need as much light as Terrans. He could hear activity all around, as the Bruuchian shouldered past him, but he couldn't see anything.

"Well, well," said a human voice about three or four meters away. "Welcome to the mines."

A flashlight flared on and the light bobbed up to Crowell. "Here, put these on." Crowell was handed a pair of goggles.

The interior of the mine sprang into view, in a ghostly green and gray video image. "Nightglasses, light amplifiers," the voice said.

"Waldo—I didn't know you were down here."

He chuckled. "You wouldn't have seen much if I weren't. I was about to call up—didn't expect you this early."

"It is rather early."

Crowell looked around. The

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mine was somewhat larger than his preconception of it. It was a roughly square cavern the size of a large hall. Some twenty Bruuchians were working one corner with vibropicks and shovels. Next to the elevator was a rack of similar tools, probably fifty of each.

"Are all of those workers up there coming down to this one mine?"

"Oh, yes. We only work one level at a time. Strangely, they seem to work better in a mob—wait'll you see it, it's quite a spectacle. About forty of them with picks and forty with shovels and twenty with barrows, working in a white frenzy from the time they get here until the time they leave, except for chow breaks. And we have to *make* them stop by turning off their picks."

In about half an hour the cavern was full, with teams of twos evenly spaced around three walls. A barrow served each pair of teams. As soon as the barrow was full, the Bruuchian who had been fidgeting beside it would tear off to the fourth wall—where Crowell and Struckheimer were standing—and dump the ore into a conveyer that took it to the surface. Then he would return and pick up a shovel; the former shoveler would get the vibropick and the pickmeister would go fidget beside the barrow. In the midst of all this activity a small Bruuchian scurried back and forth, scattering what appeared to be a mixture of sand and sawdust on the damp cave floor, narrowly escaping collision every few seconds. There was a zany order to it, like a group of little children knocking themselves out in a complicated relay race.

"You know," Crowell said, "Dr. Norman thinks the decline in life expectancy is due to simple overwork. Looking at this, I'm inclined to agree with him."

"Well, they do work harder at this than anything else I've seen them do. I don't know whether it's the cool and darkness or what. Some wag said that the cavern is some kind of a womb-symbol to them. I'm willing to ignore that until some concrete evidence comes along. As you well know, we don't have anything approaching a systematic psychology for these people. "But overwork? I don't think so. We force them to rest three times a day. Their women bring meatfruit to the mines and we feed them at each break. Eating calms them down for about twenty minutes. And I won't let the Company work them more than eight hours a day. When I came here they were working twelve."

"How much power do you have over the Company?"

"In theory, they should jump when I say frog. Their contract here is at the sufferance of the Confederation Public Health Commission. But I don't overdo it. I

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have to depend on them for supplies, manpower and so forth. It's a pretty cordial relationship—but they know there are five or six other concerns ready to snap up the contract if they make a mistake. So they're pretty good in their treatment of the natives."

"Hmm—you mean they're actually working less than they did when their life expectancy was higher?"

Waldo laughed. "I know what you're thinking. No, it can't be a case of atrophic degeneration; that would show up in the lab tests—besides, they work less in the mines now, but more in the village. You wouldn't recognize the place. Skyscrapers and—"

"Skyscrapers?"

"Well, that's what we call them—mud and straw buildings two, sometimes three stories high. It's another mystery. They have all the room in the world to expand their village radially. But somewhere they got the idea to go up instead of out. And it's quite a job; mud and straw just aren't made to take that kind of stress. Now when they build a house they have to reinforce the whole thing with ironwood—it's almost a wooden building covered with a layer of mud. Say—may' e *you* can find out why they're doing it. Nobody here's been able to get a straight answer out of them. But you can speak the dialect better than any of us. Besides, you're kind of a folk hero to them—even though I don't think any of these were alive last time you were here. They know you were responsible for a lot of the changes in their lives and they're grateful."

It was damp and cold and Crowell shivered. "For bringing them closer to stillness," he said.

Waldo said nothing. There was a rumble and the elevator came to rest behind them. "Hi, boss. Hi, Dr. Crowell. Well, I brought the beastie's meat. Want I should turn 'em off?"

Waldo looked at his watch. "Sure, go ahead."

The assistant threw a switch mounted on the elevator housing and the vibropicks stopped singing. For a while there was a chorus of ragged chunk-sounds as the workers tried to keep going despite loss of power. Then by ones and twos, they formed up a line at the elevator. The assistant gave each one a large meatfruit which he would take back to his work area. The crews would each squat in a circle, munching and talking in low grunts.

"Well, we're not needed around here," said Waldo. "How would you like to take a look at the village?"

"Fine, fine. Just let me stop by my billet to pick up my notebook and camera."

"We'll go by the lab and get a couple of beers, too. It's hot up stairs."

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THE sun was blistering hot when the cart skidded to a stop outside the village, ending the breeze that had made the trip livable.

Crowell wiped the sweat and caked dust from his face and took a final swig of beer.

"What'll we do with the empties?"

"Oh, just leave them in the cart. This is the fellow who tends the beer for me; he'll drop them off at the lab."

Crowell heaved his bulk to the ground.

"God, it's hot."

Waldo squinted at the sun. "It'll be better in a couple of hours. I suggest we find some shade."

"Suits me." They went through the village gate and started walking down the path. They couldn't see anything but the grass, taller than a man, that surrounded the village in all directions for half a kilometer. Vehicles couldn't come in closer, in consideration for the skittish reptimammals that grazed here.

The beasts didn't seem to mind people walking through, though; Crowell and Struckheimer saw several of them, placidly gnawing the grass, watching the humans from stalked eyes as they walked by. Most of them were over ten feet long, half of that length being unproductive tail and neck. But from their backs lolled strings of the meatfruit that formed the staple of the Bruuchian diet. Every female (the males were set loose soon after birth and only let inside the compound for stud) supplied about thirty kilograms of meatfruit per season; every family had at least three or four of the creatures. Tending and harvesting the beasts was the major responsibility of the females.

The reptimammals were considered more than a source of meat, more than pets; they were actually low-status family members. They were "second-class citizens" because they couldn't speak and, more important, couldn't aspire to stillness—they simply died. But the Bruuchians didn't eat the flesh of the dead reptimammals. They buried them with ceremony and mourning.

A native came loping down the trail toward them, moving much more slowly than the ones in the Company city did. He stopped in front of them and said in the informal mode:

"You are Crowell-who-jests and you are Struckheimer-who-slows/ I am young one called Baluurn/ Sent to guide you on this visit."

His little speech over, the little Bruuchian fell in beside the two humans, trying to match steps with Crowell.

"I know this one," Struckheimer said. "He's learned quite a bit of English. He's been my interpreter before."

"That right," the creature belched in a strange burlesque of

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human speech. "All time in—creche I hear tapes you-Crowell leave."

This startled Crowell. He struggled with the informal mode: "The creche is for teaching/the rituals of life and stillness/ Did you forego the teaching of your ancestors /in learning to speak with humans?"

"The priest vouchsafed me/my soul a special path to stillness/ and gave over my role as youngest/ to one of my brothers/so that my time and mind could/be used to plumb/the ways and tongue of humans."

"What was that all about?"

"Well, he evidently had to use most of his learning year studying English—he said the priest gave him some sort of dispensation from learning the social rites. That usually takes most of their year."

"What word 'di-pensa-un' mean?"

"It's like 'permission,' Baluurn, but from a priest," Struckheimer said.

"That right. Priest give dipesa'un so I not-like brothers."

"Your English is very good, Baluurn. I studied your tongue for ten years and can't speak it as well as you speak mine."

Baluurn bounced his head in a nod. "Struckheimer - who - slows says human not-like Bruuchian. Learn more all long life but never so much one year. Must be for Bruuchian go into stillness much sooner than human."

THE grass was thinning out and they could see the village ahead. Crowell immediately saw what Struckheimer meant—only about half of the dwellings were the familiar asymmetric mud-and-wattle construction. The newer ones were all almost rectangular and up to ten meters high.

"Baluurn, why did your people stop building the old way?"

The Bruuchian looked at the ground and seemed to be concentrating on not getting ahead of the humans. "It new-kind—new part living ritual. Leave still ones near ground. Pass many time each day. Live above so pass still ones many time. Talk to still ones, still ones know more, still ones happier and more useful."

"I guess it makes sense," Waldo said with a straight face. "You couldn't expect them to know what was going on, locked up in a back room."

"Oh, never locked. Lock human word, no Bruuchian. But you right, still ones more useful."

Crowell fingered the small camera clipped to his belt. This could get in the way of one of his ideas. "I thought it was forbidden to move a still one; a new family had to be started if you moved one."

"That true, very true. New house built around old house. Take off

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old roof, leave hole in living house floor, buy rope Company store, pass by still ones climbing up and down many time every day."

"Quite so." Crowell took the camera from his belt and took some pictures of the buildings. Then he scribbled descriptions of each picture in his notebook. Protective coloration.

"For some reason they must want to have larger families," Waldo said. "I know they used to split the still ones and the family when it got too crowded and start a new family on the outskirts of the village."

A native woman walked by, leading two docile reptimammals. The fresh brown ooze on their backs showed they had just been pruned. Crowell snapped a picture.

"Larger families, maybe. But this building up instead of out also preserves grassland; that might be important." Baluurn was silent through this exchange—he was used to humans going off in sudden *non sequiturs*. *He* knew why they were building up, just as he had told them. It was part of the living ritual, now.

"Crowell-who-jests?"

"Yes, Baluurn?"

"One family asked you visit. Old, very old woman remembers you. Would speak you before stillness, very soon."

"Say, that's odd. I asked them if anyone remembered you and they said all had passed into stillness."

Crowell smiled. "You used the formal mode, right?"

"Sure, you can handle the other?"

"Well, they probably misunderstood you, then. It's hard to talk about females in the formal mode, requires a certain amount of circumlocution. They thought you were asking if any *men* who remembered me were still alive."

"Crowell-who-jests is right. Struckheimer-who-slows should sent for me talk. All village know old Shuurna."

"Well, let's go to see her. Should be interesting."

The ground floor entrance was like a double door, the two men and the Bruuchian going first into the new building. They were standing in a big room filled from floor to ceiling with the old family hut. Baluurn stood at the doorway of the hut and called out the ritual of entrance. Someone upstairs responded and they went in the second door.

"I go up first see Shuurna ready speak Crowell."

Baluurn clambered up the rope. Crowell looked at it doubtfully; took another Gravitol and swallowed it.

They were surrounded by a couple of dozen still ones, open eyes regarding them with unreadable expressions.

When Baluurn disappeared into the upper floor, Crowell took

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something from his pocket and walked to one of the still ones resting against the wall.

"What are you doing, Isaac?"

"Just a second," Isaac whispered, reaching behind the still one. He returned and handed a small plastic envelope to Waldo. He put a small vibroknife back in his pocket. "A scraping from the shoulder," he whispered.

Waldo's eyes grew round. "Do you know—"

Baluurn was sliding back down the rope. Two others followed him. "Shuurna wants speak Crowell-who-jests alone."

"Well, I'm game," he said. "If I can make it up that rope."

Crowell got a good grip and heaved himself up, catching the slack end between his feet. With an extra Gravitol in him, it wasn't really hard, but he huffed and muttered and went up very slowly.

SHUURNA was lying on a woven mat. She was the oldest Bruuchian Crowell had ever seen, hair yellowed and falling out in patches, eyes clouded with blindness, shrunken dugs loose gray flaps of flesh. She spoke the informal mode in a weak voice.

"Crowell-who-jests / I knew you in my year of learning / so I remember you better than my own children / you walk differently now / your steps seem a young man's steps."

"The years have been kinder to / me than to you / Shuurna who awaits stillness / this apparent youth though / is from an herb / the doctor gave me to / give me the strength of a younger man." This was something Crowell hadn't foreseen.

"My large-eyes are darkened / but my many-eyes tell me / that you are taller by two kernels / Crowell-who-jests / than you were my lifetime ago."

"This is so / it is something that may / happen to a human as he ages." You could add centimeters with plastiflesh, but you couldn't take them off.

There was a long silence that would have been considered awkward in human society.

"Shuurna / do you have something to / tell me or ask me?"

Another long pause. "No / you who look like Crowell-who-jests / I waited to see you / but now you are not here / please summon the youngest and the new oldest."

Crowell walked to the rope. "Baluur!"

"Yes, Crowell-who-jests."

"Shuurna is ready to—pass into stillness. Can you find the oldest and the youngest?"

The two who had come down with Baluur scampered back up the rope. They walked past Crowell and stood before Shuurna. Crowell started to leave.

"Crowell-who-jests," the older one spoke, " / would you help us /

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with our joyful burden / I am too old and this one is too small / to carry Shuurna / to join the other still ones downstairs."

Other still ones? Crowell went over to the three and stooped to take Shuurna's hand. It was solid, unyielding as wood.

"Old man in the family of Shuurna / I do not understand / I thought no humans could be present during / the stillness ritual."

The old man nodded in that disarmingly human way. "This was so / until not-long ago / when the priests told us of the change / to my poor knowledge / you are only the second human / to be so honored."

Crowell took up Shuurna's body unceremoniously, a hand under stiff arm and thigh. "And who was the other fortunate human?"

The old one had his back to Crowell, following the youngster who was scampering to the rope. "I was not there / but I was told / it was Malatesta-the-highest."

Malatesta, the last supervisor of the mines—and the first disappearance.

The rope threaded through an iron ring (also purchased at the Company store), and normally hung as a single strand, a stick tied to one end preventing it from slipping through the ring. Crowder balanced Shuurna's corpse on its feet and the old one passed the rope under her arms, securing it with something that was almost a square knot. They passed the body down to Baluur, who untied it and, balancing it with one hand, pulled in slack until the rope was in its original position. Then the two Bruuchians clambered down, hand over hand. Crowell followed with a little less confidence.

During the whole process, Waldo had stood to one side, looking rather lost. The old one addressed Crowell in the informal mode and Crowell replied with what Waldo recognized as a polite refusal.

"Uh—what was that all about?"

"We were invited to the wake, you know, recite all the good deeds the old gal was responsible for and help decide where to lean the body. I told them no, thanks. These affairs last all day and I've got an appointment. Besides, I've always gotten the feeling that having humans present puts a damper on the festivities. They have to invite you, of course, if you're anywhere nearby when the thing starts."

"And we're about as near as anybody's ever been. Glad you didn't accept for us—this whole business has gotten me a little queasy."

"Well, we can leave any time. Baluur's staying, naturally."

"Let's go."

THE sun was still blazing overhead when they stepped out of the hut. The whole experience

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couldn't have taken more than half an hour. They had walked down the dusty road a few meters before Waldo spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"That sample you gave me—what makes you think they won't find out you took it?"

"Don't be so damned furtive! We're just tourists, right? You'd need a magnifying glass to find where I made the incision. Besides, I took it from one of the last accessible corpses, right up against a wall—with their tabu against moving them, we're safe."

"Well, I'll have to admit it is a windfall. Maybe we can finally figure out how—say, you were there when the woman died! Did you see anything?"

Crowell stared at the ground for a few steps before replying. "I was leaving, backing out; I was sure they didn't want me around. But they just went up to her and looked at her and said it was done. Whatever kind of embalming they do, they must do it while the person's still alive." Crowell shuddered in the heat. "They didn't even touch her."

IV

CROWELL had deliberately ignored Dr. Norman's advice and had made an appointment with the ambassador in the early evening. He expected the man would be pretty intoxicated by then. A strikingly handsome man, aristocratic features, gray hair flo ing onto broad shoulders, answered the door.

"Ambassador Fitz-Jones?"

"Yes—oh, you must be Dr. Crowell. Come in, come in." He didn't seem too far gone.

Crowell walked into an elegantly appointed room, which the Otto part of his mind identified as being furnished in American Provincial, late 20th Century. Even if the furnishings were fakes the shipping costs were staggering to contemplate.

Fitz-Jones indicated an amorphous leather-covered chair, and Crowell allowed it to swallow him. "Let me get you a drink. You may have brandy and water, brandy and soda, brandy and juice, brandy and ice, brandy and brandy, or—" he gave a conspiratorial wink— "a bit of Chateau Mouton Rothschild of 'sixty-one vintage."

Even Crowell knew what that vintage represented. He murmured an appropriate comment.

"Somehow a small cask of it was mistakenly delivered here, instead of a case of badly needed immigration forms." Fitz-Jones shook his head gravely. "These things are inevitable concarp—ah—concomitants of trying to operate within the framework of an interstellar bureaucracy. We learn to adjust."

Crowell revised his earlier estimate. Fitz-Jones could well have been adjusting all day.

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"That sounds wonderful."

He watched the man's careful steps and marveled at the human organism's ability to cope with proven toxins.

The ambassador produced two highball glasses filled with the deep red wine. "No proper glassware, of course. Perhaps it's just as well. 'Sixty-one doesn't travel well, you know—and it won't keep; have to drink it up quickly."

It tasted quite good to Crowell, but Otto could tell that it was rather bruised. Barbarous treatment for the wine of the century.

Fitz-Jones took a delicate sip that somehow managed to deprive the tumbler of two centimeters of wine. "Did you have anything specific to see me about—not that I don't enjoy company whenever it comes my way."

"Guess I just wanted to meet somebody else who wasn't working for the Company. I need an outsider's view of what's been happening the past ten years. Quite a bit has been, I understand."

Fitz-Jones made an expansive gesture that came within a millimeter of spilling wine. Otto could appreciate the years of practice that had gone into the perfection of that ploy. "Not really, not really—at least until a year ago, of course. Until then life here was just the workaday grind of running this, you'll excuse the expression, world. Absolutely nothing for *me* to do while everybody else kept the sweatshop working. Submit a blank report twice a year. Then we had the disappearances, of course. Superintendant Malatesta was the official head, titular ruler, of this planet, so you can *imagine* the paperwork I went through. I was on the subspace radio for *hours* every day, until the—can you keep a secret, Dr. Crowell?"

"As well as the next man, I suppose."

"Well, it's not really a secret any more, since the doctor—Dr. Norman, that is—figured it out. It's probably all around the Company by now. Anyhow, I talked to the Confederation officials on Terra and they agreed to send a couple of TBII men to investigate. Well, they came here—gave a splendid imitation of two scientific chaps—and while they were poking around, they disappeared, too."

"The two geologists?"

"Precisely. And you'd think that, with two of their men gone, the TBII would send an army down here to see what's going on. But no. I finally talked to some undersecretary and he told me they simply couldn't afford any more men for our 'petty intrigues' on Bruuch."

"That's odd." The first item in the one report the agents had filed had been a warning about the untrustworthiness of the ambassador.

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"Indeed. So I don't think the agents disappeared the way Malatesta did—you know, died. They must have had a light cruiser hidden off somewhere and when they found what they were after—they just left. Damned frustrating, you know; *we* still haven't the faintest idea of what happened to Malatesta. I'm certain that they found out."

It's quite likely they did find out, Otto thought. "Couldn't the TBII have sent more agents without telling you?"

"No, impossible; violation of Confederation law. I'm the sole federal official on this planet. I must be notified. And besides, only two people have come in since the agents disappeared. One was Dr. Struckheimer's new assistant; I've kept my eye on him. I think he must be just what he says he is, dull fellow, really. The other newcomer, of course, is you.

CROWELL chuckled. "Well, I rather fancy being a spy. Will you ply me with wine frequently, then?"

Fitz-Jones smiled, but his eyes were cold. "Of course—as I said, it won't keep. Confidentially, I am rather expecting another agent to show up, whether they tell me about it or not. The TBII is fanatically secretive and they don't really give a hang about interstellar law. I suspect they'll send somebody along and it could be anybody. You know that personality overlay technique—"

"The zombie business?" Crowell echoed Dr. Norman's words.

"Exactly. They can make a xerocopy of anybody. Anybody they can kidnap and hold for a month, anyhow." He drained the last of his wine. "This puts a distinguished, shall we say 'well-exposed' person, such as yourself, above suspicion, of course. Too many people would notice your absence."

His eyes told Otto again, *He's lying, he suspects.*

The ambassador levered himself out of the oversized cushion. "Here, let me freshen your drink." He came back with two full glasses.

"Thanks. Oops, time to take my Pandroxin." He took a pillbox from his pocket and washed down two pills, one Gravitol and one alcohol suppressant.

"Ah, weak stuff, that. You must have a time here. Won't they let you take Gravitol?"

"No—I asked for it, naturally. But they say I'm too old and too fat." *How dangerous is this subtle drunkard?* "You have any theory about Malatesta?"

Fitz-Jones shrugged and repeated the sloshing gesture. "I really don't know. I'm sure of one thing, though. This nonsense about the creatures being responsible is just that, a bunch of snurgsh—pardon—hogwash."

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"I agree. They simply aren't capable of violence."

"Not only that. Malatesta was a great favorite of theirs. He even learned quite a bit of the language. They adopted him into one of the families, an honorary Bruuchian."

"I didn't know that."

"Oh, yes. He went to a lot of their get-togethers. That priestly council made him an advisor of some sort."

"Yes," Crowell mused. "I heard today that he had been present at one of their stillness rituals."

"Where they embalm the poor creatures? Well, *I* didn't know that. Wonder why he didn't tell anybody about it. Struckheimer would've been his friend for life."

"Well, as you say, the Bruuchians couldn't have done away with Malatesta; so it must have been either an accident or murder. I guess the agents investigated both possibilities."

"Presumably. They seem to spend most of their time dredging dustpits. Supposedly taking samples, actually looking for a body, I guess. I suppose the prime murder suspect would be Kindle, the new supervisor. But he never wanted the job—it's twice as much work for only a pittance more pay. Besides, he's worried that whatever happened to Malatesta could happen to him, too."

"You know him well, then?" *Watch it, don't get too inquisitive.*

"Oh, quite well. He was in the Civil Service when I was posted on Lamarr's World. He had a considerable block of stock in the Company and when the assistant supervisor's position became open he came out here and took the job. I was transferred here about a year later and we just picked up where we had left off."

Time to change the subject. "Lamarr's World. I've heard of it, of course, but I've never been there."

"It was a lovely world." Fitz-Jones started the sloshing gesture but checked himself. "Especially compared to this desolation."

They talked of this and other harmless topics for about an hour, Crowell stifled a yawn. "I really must be going. Excuse me for being a poor guest, but I tire so easily in this gravity."

"Oh, excuse *me* for being an inconsiderate host. I can be quite a bore, I know." Fitz-Jones helped Crowell up. "I'm afraid you may have trouble getting a taxi—"

"No, no problem. I can walk the few blocks." They exchanged amenities and Crowell lurched away convincingly.

HIS room had been searched by an amateur; Fitz-Jones' assistant, probably. He hadn't caught the hairs pasted over the closet door and suitcase lid—or even the pencil propped against the front door. Crowell sighed. Otto was worthy of more.

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Anyhow, there was nothing incriminating in the billet itself. Crowell went into the outhouse and latched the door. He took out a penstick and removed the cap. Doing so caused the pen to emit an invisible beam of ultraviolet light. Crowell shook a contact lens out of the cap and placed it into his left eye. With it, he could see quite well, though the place would still be pitch-black to light amplifiers or infrared eye clusters.

The hair across the loosened board was still in place. He lifted the board and removed the case that used to be his suitcase's false bottom. He took a few items from it, replaced it and smoothed the hair down in the position he had memorized.

The street lights went off at midnight. Crowell donned the nightglasses he had bought at the Company store and walked the kilometer to the main warehouse without meeting anyone.

Knowing that any guard would also be equipped with nightglasses, Crowell approached the building on a parallel street a block away and sat quietly behind the edge of a building for a half hour, watching the entrance.

Satisfied that the warehouse was unguarded, Crowell crossed to the entrance and studied the lock. It was a simple magnetically coded padlock and he opened it in a couple of minutes with a desensitizer and a set of picks.

His closing of the door behind him dropped the light level below the nightglasses' threshold and Crowell had to use his ultraviolet penstick to see. The tool was designed for close work, but he could get around with it. Directed at his feet it made a bright spot surrounded by a vague circle about a meter in diameter. He was unable to get an overall view of the warehouse, though—merely a dim impression of crates stacked around.

He wasn't looking for anything specific and really didn't have any great expectations. This was just another part of the routine, like going through the mines. He wished it had been possible to get around there without a guide, when the mines were empty.

Crowell walked around for an hour or so, examining every useless detail. At the other end of the warehouse he came to an open door. He doubted he would find anything worth his effort, but he went in to check.

A wide trough along one wall proved to be filled with a mixture of sand and sawdust, probably from the native ironwood. The opposite wall was stacked high with plastic bags filled with the same substance. At the end of the room stood a sink and a couple of large buckets. A shelf above the sink held several cans the size of half-liter paint cans. Evidently this was the place they prepared the substance that kept the na-

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tives from slipping on the wet mine floors.

He inspected the sink and it was just a dirty sink. The cans above had been inexpertly lettered, "Antiseptic." He picked up one and shook it; it was about three-quarters full of some powder. On the top he found a faint legend: BISMUTH NITRATE CRYSTALS C. P. 1 KG.

Crowell almost dropped the can in surprise. Evidently the original label had been eradicated, but a trace of it remained visible in ultraviolet. He replaced the can and sat back against the sink. The crystals could account for the native's shortened life span and for the frantic activity in the mine; bismuth was a powerful stimulant and euphoric for them, as well as a cumulative poison.

They must absorb it through their feet as they work . . .

Now who would be responsible? Workers who mixed the bismuth nitrate into the sand-sawdust mixture probably didn't know what was going on—or the cans might as well have been left unaltered. Had the labels been erased before the cans were shipped in?

That would seem likely, since everybody seems to know about the bismuth theory. Better have a talk with Jonathan Lyndham, new Chief of Incoming (Supplies) . . .

THE night outside was as dark as it had been when Crowell had first broken into the warehouse. He snapped the padlock and gratefully stripped the thin plastic gloves off his hands.

An almost inaudible click came from behind him and to his left. The Crowell-mind reacted even before the Otto-mind could think "safety switch." Crowell dove for a ditch on the side of the road. He was blinded as his nightglasses fell off, but a bright red pencil of light fanning the road at waist level provided its own illumination before it flickered out. By then he had slid a miniature airpistol out of a pocket holster. He aimed at where the fading retinal afterimage showed the scarlet dot of a laser muzzle—he squeezed off four silent shots in rapid succession. He heard at least three of them ricochet from the warehouse wall, then the shuffle of a man running away.

He lost precious seconds finding the nightglasses, took another second to sort out the images and see the man running, nearly a block away. Extreme range for this little pop-gun—Crowell aimed high, fired and missed, fired and missed. On his third try the man stumbled to the ground, staggered back to his feet and continued running, holding his arm. If he still had the laser pistol he didn't seem disposed to use it. Good thing, Otto thought. If the man had been a professional he would have figured out how lightly armed Crowell

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was and would have flattened down at that extreme range to give Crowell a leisurely roasting.

He studied the rapidly dwindling figure. Nobody he recognized. Not fat or thin or tall or short. Crowell had to admit that he probably wouldn't know the man the next time he saw him. Unless the assailant had that arm in a sling or cast—which wasn't unlikely.

THE radiophone started buzzing as soon as Crowell stepped into his billet. He picked up the handset.

"Crowell speaking."

"Issac? Where have you been at this hour? This is Waldo—I've been trying to get you since three."

"Oh, I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep—so I took a little walk to tire myself out."

"Well, I—look, pardon me for calling so late, but that sample you gave me—some of the cells in it are still alive!"

"Still alive? From a two-hundred-year-old mummy?"

"And undergoing mitosis. You know what mitosis is?"

"Cells dividing, yeah—"

"My finding out was just a coincidence—I had the incubator stage on the microscope, that helped. I'd just put the sample in there rather than go through the rigamarole of changing to a regular stage. There was an interesting cell, a big nerve cell, that had evidently died in the middle of the anaphase—of mitosis, that is. I looked at it for a minute and then went off to get a beer, got sidetracked by some maintenance I had to do on the spectrometer—anyhow, I got back to the microscope a couple of hours later and that same nerve cell was in a different part of the anaphase! Those cells are growing and dividing, but at a rate that must be several hundred times slower than normal Bruuchian cells."

"That's incredible!"

"It's more than incredible—it's impossible. I don't know, Isaac. I'm a generalist, just an overeducated veterinarian. We need a couple of real biologists—and we'll have them, too, dozens of them, as soon as the word gets out. Suspended animation, that's what it adds up to. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if those Bruuchians had a hundred people studying them a year from now."

"You're probably right." For the first time, Crowell wondered whether somebody else might be listening in.

Somebody was.

V

"GLAD you could make it, Isaac." Dr. Norman's handshake was unusually firm.

"Couldn't pass up a chance to beat you again after all these years, Willy."

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"Ha—believe I was four wins ahead when you left. Match you for white."

"No, Willy, you go first. Out of consideration for your youth and inexperience."

The doctor laughed. "Pawn to King-four and I'll fix you a drink."

Crowell sat down at the chessboard and made Willy's first move for him. He looked at the pieces for a second and started his defense. "Talked to Waldo today?"

"Oh, yes—the mummy thing. Quite fantastic. He was most secretive as to how he came upon a sample, though. I can just see Waldo skulking into one of those huts with his dissecting kit." Dr. Norman set a drink down beside Crowell and took the chair opposite him. "I don't suppose *you* had anything to do with it, Isaac?"

"Well," Crowell said cautiously, "I'm pretty sure how he got the sample. But, as you say, it's a deep dark secret right now."

"This world is full of secrets." The doctor made his second move.

Crowell responded promptly.

"A Philidor defense, Isaac? You're getting conservative in your old age. You used to be quite unpredictable."

"And you used to be four wins ahead."

The game went on for about an hour, with neither man saying much. Isaac was ahead in both position and strength when Dr. Norman looked up and asked, "Who are you?"

"What did you say, Willy?"

The doctor took a piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it and tossed it in the middle of the board. "If you were Isaac Crowell, you'd be dying or dead, on Gravitol. And don't tell me you aren't on it—Pandroxin gives a yellowish cast to the skin. You don't have it. Besides, your chess style is wrong; good, but all wrong. Isaac never knew how to play position."

Crowell finished off his drink, mostly melted ice, and leaned back in the chair. He stuck his right hand in his pocket and aimed the pistol under the table at the doctor's abdomen.

"My name is Otto McGavin. I'm an agent for the TBII. But please continue to call me Isaac—I'm more Crowell than McGavin in this persona."

The doctor nodded. "And you've done a very good job. Much more convincing than those other two—that is why you came here, isn't it, to investigate their disappearance?"

"Investigate their deaths. Every agent has a monitor implanted in his heart—they stopped broadcasting."

"Well, needless to say, your secret's safe with me."

"You shouldn't be burdened with it too much longer. I expect to have things out in the open within a

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day or two. Down to business now—" Crowell moved a knight and said, "Mate in three."

"Yes, I saw that coming." Willy smiled. "I was hoping to distract you."

"Doctor, I think you missed your calling." Otto relaxed a little. "By the way, have you treated any gunshot wounds lately?"

"What—why?"

"Somebody tried to ambush me last night. I shot him."

"Well, I did treat a gunshot wound this morning—but it couldn't have been your fellow."

CROWELL took out his pistol, opened the magazine and let one of the small pellets roll onto the chessboard. "A wound in the right arm, this size projectile."

Dr. Norman rolled the pellet between his thumb and forefinger. "Yes, it was this small. The very devil to get out, too. And the wound was in the right arm." He took a deep breath. "Early this morning Ambassador Fitz-Jones and Superintendant Kindle woke me up to take a pellet out of Kindle's arm. They said they had been up drinking and decided to try some target practice in the ambassador's back yard. Fitz-Jones had accidentally shot Kindle; he was most apologetic. They both reeked of wine, but acted quite sober. Kindle was in some pain; it looked as if they had tried to get the pellet out themselves. But it was too deep."

"Kindle—I've never met him."

"It seems you did meet him, last night. It's hard to believe. He seems such a meek fellow."

"You might as well know the whole story. If anything happens to me, try to get word to Confederation authorities. Some group of persons, including but not necessarily limited to the ambassador and the superintendant, is systematically poisoning the Bruuchians who work in the mines. The only motivation I can see is that it makes them work harder—increases profits. Say, Kindle owns a large part of the Company, doesn't he? I wonder whether Fitz-Jones also has an interest."

"I don't know," Dr. Norman said. "He claims to be independently wealthly. I can see that he might well be investing in the company, though. Profits have quadrupled in the past few years. Why, I've been thinking of investing, myself."

"Maybe you better not. Profits will be going down pretty soon."

"I suppose. Well, it is a horrible thing, even though I don't much care for the little boogers myself. What can I do to help?"

"Well, I've got to get to a subspace radio. The only two on the planet are the superintendant's and the ambassador's. If you can get one of them here for an hour or so, I'll be able to call in the arrest and

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get authority to confine them."

"That'll be easy enough. Fitz-Jones and I have to fill out an accident report and take it to the Company clerk for witnessing. I told him to come by around three this afternoon; it'll take more than an hour."

"You couldn't get Kindle to come up, too, could you?"

"Afraid not. I've already confined him to quarters—wouldn't do to erode my authority in these matters by telling him to come over for a chat. But you're in no danger from him. I had to make a deep incision in his right triceps. He's going to be either doped up or in considerable pain for at least a week."

"Can't say that I have too much sympathy for him. Well, then, I'll pay a visit to the ambassadorial residence about three o'clock. Here, take this." Crowell handed the pistol to Dr. Norman. "I'm afraid I've set you up as a secondary target."

Dr. Norman turned the little weapon over on his palm. "Won't you be needing this thing more than I?"

"No, I'm going to pick up some heavier artillery. Kindle had a laser pistol last night—if he'd known what he was doing, he could have fried me with no trouble."

"Well, I'll certainly keep it. But I've never fired a gun in my life."

"Well, be careful—that pistol doesn't have a safety. Just aim it in the right general direction and start pulling the trigger—it has over a hundred shots left in the magazine."

Dr. Norman dropped the weapon into the capacious front pocket of his lab coat. "I hope you get them safely incarcerated before I have to use it."

"They should be in the Company jail before dark tonight."

FROM his billet window Crowell could see the ambassador roll away toward the dispensary. He unplugged the laser pistol and checked the charge on it—it was more than half-full, two minutes of continuous operation, which would be about enough to take on a platoon of infantrymen. He held both the pistol and his burglar's kit in his right hand and draped a light jacket over them.

He set out on foot down the street away from the ambassador's house, then circled around and came up behind the place. There were no buildings to obscure Fitz-Jones' view of the desert, which rolled in from the horizon to within a few meters of a large picture window.

Crowell took a crayon from his kit and inscribed a large black circle on the window. The black turned to chalky white and the circle of plastic fell out. With considerable effort he pulled himself up to the hole and through. He swallowed a Gravitol –only one more was left in his pillbox—and reflected on

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how good it was going to be to get his real body back again.

He checked three rooms before he found the radio in the study. There was a cover over the sending plate and he cursed aloud when he saw that it had a thumbprint lock. He would need hours to open it.

Nothing for it but to wait until Fitz-Jones returned and force him to open it. Crowell had an uncharacteristically macabre thought as he felt the weight of the vibroknife in his pocket. He only needed the man's thumb.

Might as well enjoy the wait. Crowell walked over the thick carpet to the kitchen. He found a glass, stuck the laser into his belt and tapped the cask of wine.

"Don't do anything foolish, Isaac."

Crowell turned slowly. His perceptions registered rapidly, without punctuation: *Mark II Westinghouse antique laser safety off right-hand range three meters set on full dispersion no chance . . .*

"Why Jonathan. Fancy meeting you here."

Hand shaking but full dispersion can't miss hasn't fired yet probably won't thinkthinkthink . . .

"I'm surprised at you, Isaac. Such language you used a minute ago. But you aren't really Isaac, are you? Any more than those other two were geologists. You'll be joining your friends tonight, Isaac. You can talk over old times, out in the dustpit."

"Shut up." Another man came into view, his right arm stiff in a tractor cast. Kindle. "Give me that gun." Kindle took it into his left hand. Crowell noted that he was trembling even more than Jonathan, but from pain and probably anger, rather than nervousness. "Now go disarm him."

Kill him use body as shield would work one gee Otto-body but Crowell-body too slow too big . . .

Jonathan plucked the gun from Crowell's belt and hopped back. "You aren't as dangerous as Stuart said you would be."

"He's dangerous, all right. But we've pulled his fangs. Go on back to your office, Lyndham. Fitz and I'll finish this job; you're the only one without any good reason for being here."

Jonathan left by the front door.

"Well, Mr. McGavin—I suppose you find this rather embarassing, to be held at bay by a meek fellow like me.

"Yes, we heard your whole conversation this morning—Dr. Norman's radiophone really doesn't work too well, neither does Dr. Struckheimer's; they broadcast all the time, straight into a recorder in my office." He motioned with the gun. "Come sit in the living room, Mr. McGavin. By all means bring your wine. I'd love to join you, but my good hand is full — disappointment should make it even easier to kill you when the time comes."

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CROWELL sat in the old-fashioned chair and wondered when the time would come. "You can't actually think you can keep getting away with this."

"It's a big dustpit, the biggest. I'm afraid Drs. Norman and Struckheimer will be following you into it, too. We can't afford to have dozens of specialists prying around."

Crowell shook his head. "If I don't report, you're going to have to contend with more than a handful of scientists. A battle cruiser will land in your port and put the whole damn planet under arrest."

"Strange they didn't do it when the first two agents disappeared. That's a pretty clumsy bluff, McGavin."

"Those two good men were agents, Mr. Kindle, but just agents. I'm a prime operator, one of twelve such. You can ask Fitz-Jones what that means when he gets back."

"You may not be alive when he gets back. He didn't want to kill you here, because to do so would entail dragging your body over nearly a kilometer of desert. But it occurs to me that we could make more than one trip."

"A grisly alternative. Do you actually think you could cut up a man as if he were a side of beef? Very messy."

"I'm a desperate—"

"Whatever are you two talking about?" Fitz-Jones came in through the hall entrance. "I saw Jonathan on the way here. I thought he was supposed to wait with you until I got back."

"I was afraid he'd do something stupid, so I told him to go. Never did feel I could trust the man very much."

"You may be right. But I didn't want to leave you alone with this expert murderer."

"Hasn't murdered me yet. Fitz, he says he's a prime operator—does that mean anything to you?"

Fitz-Jones' eyebrows went up a fraction and he looked at Crowell. "That can't possibly be true. This planet's too small to rate a prime operator."

"We always send a prime when an agent gets killed," Crowell said. "No matter how unimportant the case is otherwise."

"Possibly," Fitz-Jones mused, "and if so, I am indeed honored." He gave a mocking little bow. "But the most expert bridge player would lose if he couldn't pick up his cards. That's the position you're in, sir."

"Do you know what will happen if you murder me, Ambassador?"

"No 'if.' *After* we murder you. Will they send another prime operator? They'll soon run out."

"They'll quarantine this whole planet and ferret you out. You haven't got a chance."

"On the contrary, we have a very good chance—the chance that you're lying. Which is rather large odds, considering your circum-

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stances. I don't think ill of you for it, Mr. McGavin. I would do the same in your position."

"Why don't you stop gloating at him and get some rope. My arm's tired."

"Excellent idea." Fitz-Jones went outside and returned with a long coil.

"Finish your wine, Isaac. Come over here beside him, Kindle. If he tries anything I don't want you to roast me along with him."

Crowell expanded his chest and his biceps as Fitz-Jones wound the rope around him. An old trick and not very subtle, but Fitz-Jones didn't notice. The way he tied him up, just winding the rope around and around his body, reminded Otto that he was dealing with inexperienced amateurs and he chastised himself again for being so careless. Why, they hadn't even searched him; though he had to admit that he had nothing more lethal than a penknife stashed away. And his limbs were free.

"We have several hours' wait, Mr. McGavin. I suggest you try to sleep." Fitz-Jones went into the kitchen and came out with Crowell's laser and a soda bottle. He walked over to Crowell and chopped down with the hard plastic bottle. Crowell tried to dodge but it hit the side of his head and the room went all blue sparks and gelatin and faded away.

VI

HE HAD been awake, listening, for at least an hour when Fitz-Jones came over with a glass of water and poured it on his head.

"Wake up, Mr. McGavin. It's midnight. The lights are out and we're going for a little stroll." Crowell staggered to his feet, careful to puff out his chest and flex his muscles so the bonds appeared taut.

Kindle said, "I just thought of something, Fitz. Do you have an extra pair of nightglasses?"

"What? You didn't bring yours?"

"I'm not in the habit of carrying them around in broad daylight."

"Well, then, I'll just take care of him alone. We aren't going to take a light."

"Oh, no. After what he did to me *I* want the pleasure of roasting him—slowly."

"Sure, and stumble into a dust-pit along the way. I'm *not* letting you use the glasses and go out with him alone. You couldn't hit the ground with a rock, not even right-handed."

"Fitz, he's unarmed and tied up. And he can't see in the dark."

"Unarmed and tied up and blind, he's more dangerous than you would be in command of a battle cruiser. That's the end of the discussion."

"All right, all right. Just let me

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come along to finish him off. I can hang onto your belt."

Fitz-Jones glanced at Crowell, who was smiling in spite of his predicament. "The arrangement had a certain lack of dignity. I can see it amuses our friend. But all right. You can walk along behind me—but if he tries anything let me handle it."

"Sure, Fitz." Kindle ostentatiously switched the laser to safety. "Even if he starts throwing fission bombs, I won't fire until we get there. Then let me get in front of you and find him by laserlight."

"Let's get on with it, then. Mr. McGavin, it will be your honor to lead us. I'll direct you."

They went out by the kitchen door into the absolute blackness of the night.

Otto knew he had half a kilometer in which to make his move. He figured that his captors would be least alert about halfway there. He counted carefully measured steps, twelve hundred to a kilometer.

The men were silent except for occasional terse directions from Fitz-Jones. Otto counted three hundred steps, then moved slightly to his left. Under the rope, he raised his left hand to his right shoulder and his left arm popped out of the coil. His body shielded the action from Fitz-Jones. He had a firm mental picture of the man behind him and could now strike at any vital spot once he knew where any part of his body was.

He stopped and Fitz-Jones prodded him with the laser, giving him a reference point. He brought his left hand around in a shallow chop that sent the laser spinning. Before it hit the ground he delivered a savage, killing kick to the groin, with enough force to knock both men down.

He heard the laser skitter away and ran after it as the two men fell. But on the third step he skidded on loose gravel, lost his balance and, falling, went into a shoulder roll. But his shoulder never hit the ground.

He hit the dustpit with a faint pop and was floating through a nightmare of viscous powder. He fought to hold his breath as the dust crawled into his nostrils. Then his knees bumped against the rock floor of the pit. Fighting panic, he stood and pushed his free arm straight up. He couldn't tell whether his hand cleared the surface of the pit. Lungs burning, he tried to walk back the way he had fallen, then realized that his sense of direction had vanished. He tried to walk in a straight line, any direction was all right, the pit couldn't be more than a few meters in diameter, if it were bigger they would use *it* for their dumping place but it was impossible to walk and he drifted to his knees and crawled slowly until his head pressed against the stony wall of the pit and he dragged himself

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upright and painfully started to pull the heavy Crowell-body up.

. . . handhold foothold right arm free biceps bruising against plasti-flesh eyes on fire itching have to sneeze cool breeze on hand find edge pull up freedom . . .

Crowell put his chin on the edge of the pit, exhaled in a quick hiss and sucked in air, started to sneeze and bit his tongue hard. Kindle was screaming.

"I can't *see*! You broke them, dammit!" Fitz-Jones was moaning, making little-animal whimpering sounds. Suddenly the red glare of a laser flooded the scene. Kindle was fanning it around, using it as a searchlight. That was stupid; if anyone was awake back at the Company, they'd see it. Not likely they would come out and investigate, though.

Fitz-Jones, who shouldn't even have been alive, was actually standing, staggering, doubled over with pain. The edge of the beam caressed him and one leg burst into flame. He whirled around twice and disappeared. Another dustpit.

The light flickered off. "McGavin? I hope you saw that. You're hiding out there somewhere, I know it. But I can wait, I can wait—when it gets light, you're a dead man!"

McGAVIN cautiously pulled himself out of the dustpit. He unwound the rope that was still wrapped loosely around his body. After investigating the ground around the pit by touch, he had to admit that the laser must have fallen in. He wasn't going after it.

There was a large outcropping of rock about thirty meters away; he had seen it by laser-light. Slowly, silently he crawled in that direction, groping in front of him, patting the ground with his palm. Several times his hand found the warm talcum-powder softness of a dustpit—he detoured around it. Finally he got to the outcropping and sat behind a large boulder.

He took stock. One vibroknife, two hands, two feet and lots of rocks. One coil of rope. He had the alternatives of garroting Kindle, cutting him to pieces, or simply breaking every bone in his body. All methods effective against an unarmed man. But suicide against a laser.

He was tired, more tired than he could remember having been in all of his strenuous life. He rattled the pillbox softly. One Gravitol left.

Have to save it, take it just before dawn . . .

He formulated and discarded half a dozen plans. Might as well have just taken a deep breath in the dustpit. So tired.

Footsteps—Kindle wouldn't be insane enough to walk up in the dark. No, the steps were confident; it was a Bruuchian. He walked right up to Crowell and sat down, not a meter away. Crowell could hear his breathing.

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Crowell whispered in the informal mode. "Do I know you / friend who comes in the night?"

The Bruuchian also whispered. "Crowell-who-jests / I am Pornuuran / of the family Tuurlg / you do not know me / though I know you / you are a friend of my brother / Kindle-who-leads."

"Kindle-who-leads / is in your family?"

"Yes / the priests gave the family Tuurlg / the honor-tradition of adopting / the highest humans / Kindle-who leads and / before him / Malatesta-the-highest."

"Brother-of-my-friend Pornuuran / could you lead me / from this place / before the desert is light?"

The Bruuchian laughed, an almost silent belch. "Crowell-who-jests / you are indeed the merriest human / my brothers and I / came to observe / the human stillness ritual / of course we cannot interfere. The priests / saw the red light in the desert / and sent us here for instruction / perhaps to help / carry the still one."

"Where are your other brothers?"

"Crowell-who-jests / my oldest and youngest brothers / stand near their brother / Kindle-who-leads / he also asked us to / lead him in darkness / to lead him to you / but we would not disobey / the priests' order."

Thank God for that, Crowell thought. He briefly considered using the native as a shield, but that would be pretty low. And ineffective; the native was too small.

With a start Crowell realized that he could see a vague outline of the native silhouetted against the lighter rock. He took out the pillbox and swallowed his last Gravitol. Instantly the tiredness washed away.

He peered over the side of the boulder. He couldn't yet see Kindle, but it would only be a matter of minutes; dawn came swiftly here. Then Kindle could walk up at his leisure.

Suddenly Crowell had a plan. It was outrageously simple, and rather risky. But it might work—and he had little choice.

HE GATHERED an armload of rocks and set out across the plain, moving as quickly as he could with safety. By the time his hand found a dustpit there was enough light for him to see it disappear into the powder. He felt around and determined where the edge of the pit was, then set down the rocks and vibroknife and lowered himself into the warm pool, fighting the urge to scramble out immediately.

He arranged the rocks around the flat edge in such a way that his head would be hidden from view when he was immersed up to his chin.

The blade of the knife only slid out halfway when he touched the

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button on the side. He checked with his fingernail and it wasn't vibrating. The dust must have fouled the mechanism. Well, it still had a point and an edge.

He could hear Kindle moving, about twenty meters away, he estimated. Still couldn't see the man, but he chucked a rock in his direction.

The laser glared in answer. It washed the boulder he had been using as a shield; he could hear the rock crackle and smelled a sharp tang of ozone and nitrogen dioxide.

"Getting warm back there, McGavin? I know where you are — I heard my little friend go up there. Might as well just step out and save yourself the wait." He gave the rock another short turn.

Now Crowell could just make out Kindle. Three Bruuchians were walking with him. He was stepping very cautiously, watching the ground. Crowell immersed himself up to his nose.

"This is it, McGavin. Now you're a dead man." Crowell looked over the edge and saw Kindle's back, some five meters away. If the knife were working, he could throw it for an easy kill. But two inches of plain steel required closer action.

He picked up the knife and quietly pulled himself out of the pit. He ran softly toward Kindle, who was shouting at the rock, laser at eye level. Almost too easy.

Then one of the Bruuchians jerked his head around, seeing Crowell. Kindle caught the movement and turned. Otto dove for a knee-high tackle. The beam brushed Crowell and his shoulder and half his face burst into flame, snuffed out immediately as he piled into Kindle and both men went down heavily. Crowell pinned Kindle's gun arm to the ground and the ravening beam spent itself uselessly on the big rock, while Crowell plunged the knife again and again into Kindle's back; even in a white fury of pain and hate he was instinctively going for the vulnerable kidneys. The shock reactivated the knife; the rest of the blade hummed out and then it slipped with equal fluidity through flesh and bone and organs. Kindle arched his back and was still.

Crowell rose to his knees and saw that Kindle still held the laser in a spastic grip, doing a fair job of melting the rock. He couldn't pry the pistol from Kindle's first and he stopped trying as wave after wave of intense pain throbbed through his body.

He remembered his training. Still crouched over Kindle's body, he closed his eyes and repeated over and over the mnemonic that, from his hypnotraining, isolated the pain and squeezed it into a smaller and smaller space. When it was a tiny pinprick as hot as the interior of a star, he pushed it just a millimeter outside his skin and held it there. Very carefully he sat

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down and slowly released for use those parts of his mind that weren't occupied with keeping the pain outside.

He touched his face with the back of his hand and when he withdrew it, long filaments of melted plastiflesh still clung to it. He noted that his other hand was still dripping with gore, with Kindle's life, and he felt absolutely nothing, neither triumph nor remorse.

The material of his shirt had vaporized and the plastiflesh over his shoulder had melted completely away. The real flesh ran from angry pink to deep blistered red to a black charred mass the size of his hand. A trickle of blood oozed from the well-done area and Crowell dispassionately decided the flow was not enough to justify bandaging the wound.

The two younger Bruuchians came out from behind the rock and stood over Kindle. The older one limped out and rattled off something in the informal mode, too fast for Crowell to translate.

They picked up Kindle's stiff body and balanced it on their shoulders, to carry it away like a log. Suddenly it dawned on Crowell that Kindle wasn't really dead; the oldest and youngest had passed him into stillness while his knife was doing its work. He looked at the rictus of pain on the man's face and remembered Waldo's evidence.

The man was not dead, but he was dying. And he would die slowly for hundreds of years. Otto smiled.

DR. NORMAN and two stretcher-bearers picked their way across the desert and reached Crowell just before noon. Thirty years of medical practice had not prepared the doctor for the sight of a critically injured man sitting in front of a pool of dried and putrefying blood and gore, half his face a burned and running ruin and the other half smiling beautifically.

Dear Dr. Crowell:

Well, I finally got out of the hospital today—that plasti-flesh takes weeks to remove—and I have to admit I much prefer being myself again, to being you.

Willy Norman sends his regards. Everybody I talked to, once they knew I wasn't you, hoped that you might find the opportunity to visit there again soon. With this new light on the stillness phenomenon, a thousandfold slowdown of biological processes, you can probably get somebody to put up the money for passage—maybe you can actually talk your publisher into putting out a revised *Anomaly*.

Jonathan Lyndham, the only survivor of the "bismuth conspiracy," was con-

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victed last week of genasthenia (systematic weakening of a race) and of being an accomplice to murder. He was sentenced to a complete personality wipe.

Some of my colleagues think I'm an unregenerate barbarian, but I prefer the old-fashioned personality wipe—extinction—in cases like this. At least it has the virtue of being irreversible.

As for the other members of the conspiracy, it was never really clear whether they were being tried posthumously or just *in absentia* (except for the Ambassador Stuart Fitz-Jones, whose body hasn't yet been found, but who definitely expired in a dustpit). Both Kindle and Malatesta were found in the Tuurlg "family room," having been passed into stillness some time before clinical death. As nearly as can be reconstructed from interviewing the natives, Malatesta was consulting with a group of priests—they were *paying* him to keep salting the mines with bismuth—and suffered some sort of a seizure, perhaps a heart attack. The Tuurlg family's oldest and youngest were present and they did him the same service they would do for any other family member.

I'm happy to report that Kindle was in the process of expiring even less pleasantly when the same thing happened to him.

It's not yet clear, of course, what these two can perceive in their present state. I favor the theory that, since electrical impulses can't be slowed, general relativity and all that, they must still be feeling the same malaise they felt while expiring. Again, a barbaric sentiment, but I can't say I feel any pity for them.

Whenever I get out of the persona of a talented and/or educated person such as yourself, I feel an indefinable loss, as if parts of my mind (which was actually your mind) have been misplaced. I still retain a little Bruuchian, formal mode anyhow, and a vague outline of comparative anthropology; when I leaf through your book I often know what will be on the next page before I see it.

It was a pleasure, as such things go. I look forward to meeting you again, the next time I get to Macrobastia. Maybe I can teach you how to play position in chess.

Regards,
Otto McGavin ★

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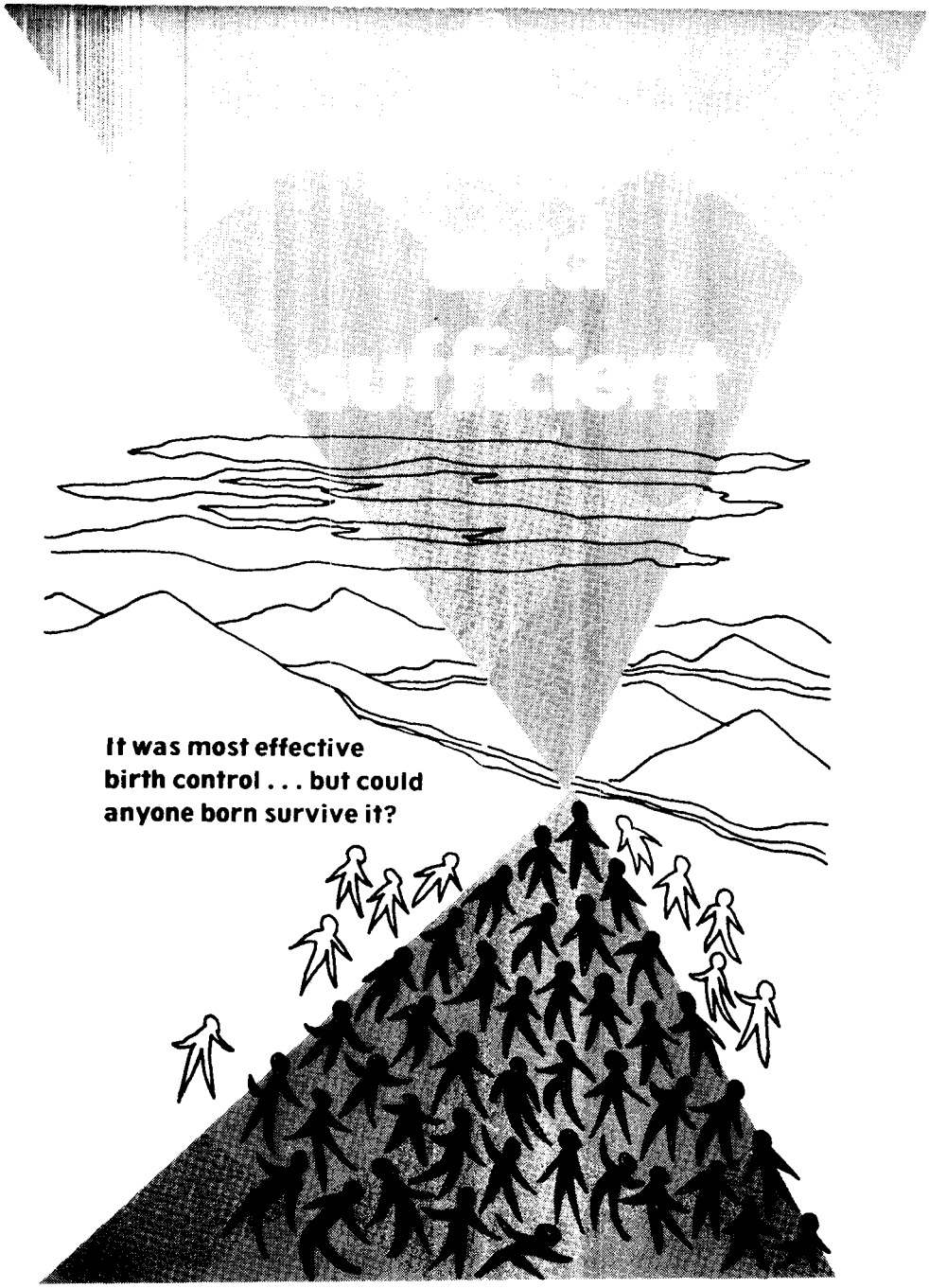

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I

MERRIHEW was a trouble-shooter. There had never been one like him, so there was no name for what he did. Dr. Poole was head of the Institute, mostly because he could sense trouble before it happened. Sensing it and doing something about it were two different things. Merrihew could do something about it. His record was most confidential but his batting average was high. Incredibly high.

And you wouldn't have thought so to look at him.

Dr. Poole had called Merrihew and they had met for lunch. When the waiter went away with his order Merrihew wanted to know the name of the trouble.

"Lasvogel," said Dr. Poole. "Look Merrihew, we have a chemistry section here—three, really, if you figure inorganic and bio and organic as separate, which they practically are. Then there's electron physics and computer design and the mechanical section and the socio think-tank and some other stuff. And if Lasvogel wanted to call himself section head of every one of them he'd have the right. Only it would look funny on the organization chart—and anyway he wouldn't want it."

Merrihew said, "That's who he is, not your trouble."

Dr. Poole wagged his big white head. "Oh, Lasvogel's the trouble all right. He's coming apart."

"Eggs in one basket," Merrihew said. "All those departments with the head lopped off?"

"All those departments could struggle along just fine without him. Emphasis on struggle, maybe, but—they'd make it. It's the West Ecuador thing. Actually I don't mind if he cracks up after he's solved that one—he's earned a good breakdown. I just want him to hang together until then."

"What's the West—"

"Quiet." The waiter came, put down drinks, went away. Dr. Poole was studious with ice cubes for a moment. He made a motion with his head that brought Merrihew leaning closer.

"Code name. It isn't Ecuador and it isn't West—and if you can do your work without knowing where it is, all the better. If Lasvogel can stay with it until he finds an answer you may never find out—and that's all right."

"How much longer does he need?"

"I wish I knew. Oh, I wish I knew. It could be tonight, tomorrow. It could be weeks."

"Or never?"

"Don't say that." Dr. Poole made a terribly controlled warding-off gesture. "Don't even think it."

"And there isn't anyone else who might—"

"No there isn't. Or maybe there is, but the only way to find him

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would be to describe the problem—and I can't do that."

"Better do it now, though."

Dr. Poole gave him a long, sharp look. The waiter came with the salads, fussed about, went away again. "All right then," said the director of the world's quietest and most extraordinary consulting company. "Overpopulation. Everything comes down to that. Too many people. Not just pollution but geopolitics—nations looking for room to expand. Businesses—they overbreed too—looking for markets. But the trouble is also too many kids in the classroom—a solitary man looking for some place to walk where it's wild and quiet. There are other problems besides overpopulation, but if we can whip that one we can whip them all."

"Better hurry," said Merrihew.

"Yes, of course. Of course: I know what you mean. It's already too late for some things. A whole ocean could die if we controlled population by tomorrow night. But you see, that's what we've done. What Lasvogel's done."

"You lost me."

DR. POOLE looked to right and left and leaned close again. "The place we call West Ecuador has the highest birth rate in the hemisphere. Or almost," he added. Maybe the hedging words were a scientist's exactitude and maybe they were a little something to keep curiosity at bay. "We have ways of keeping day-to-day tabs on it, primitive as it is. Every doctor, every clinic in West Ecuador is feeding our computers, whether any one of them knows it or not. We can even get the midwives, about five-eighths of them—much more than half anyway. We've been setting the place up for an experiment for a long time. You don't much approve of a tactic like that."

"I didn't say anything."

"Most people wouldn't approve. High-handed, undignified—I've heard all the names for it. I also know all the preachments about means and ends. We're doing what we're doing because we haven't been able to find another way—and because something has to be done now and not when we can do a public-relations job and then put it through the courts. Little kids with blown-up bellies, toothpicks for arms and legs and sores all over—yes, we're doing it for them. But also because West Ecuador is a preview. The whole world is going to be like that—not might be, is going to be—if something isn't done *now*."

Merrihew put up both hands in a way that said, *Well, all right, dammit.*

"We threw it to Lasvogel," Dr. Poole said, "and he came through." He added a little anxiously: "Lasvogel always comes through. Anyway, his treatment

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batted a thousand on a hundred and twenty-three cases. Injections. Not one of the recipients got pregnant. No side effects. I know what you're going to say," Dr. Poole added quickly, "Nothing new, eh? That Swedish pill, take it tonight, get your period tomorrow whether you've conceived or not? Wait there's more."

Merrihew sat silent.

"Lasvogel's whole approach was different," Dr. Poole continued, "and that's all I'll say about it—except his preparation is more potent than you'd believe. More even than Lasvogel believed. We did a mass treatment. Well, I'll tell you: we had a prevailing wind situation and we did it with a chemical fog. Lasvogel—we—we figured it might affect some women in a nearby city to some measurable extent. As I said, we've spent a lot of time and a lot of money setting up observation posts. We were looking for a decimal point and maybe three zeros before we came to a number—no more than that."

Dr. Poole sat and wagged his head. It looked for a while as if he had forgotten what he was saying, forgotten his lunch and his guest, forgotten even this tumbling urgency. Then he asked, "In five weeks, in a population pushing two million, know how many pregnancies we recorded in West Ecuador?"

It was not Merrihew's style to respond to rhetorical questions. He simply waited.

"Seventeen. Seventeen, in five weeks."

"Wow." Merrihew cut steak, forked it up, lifted it, looked at it, put it down. "Wow." Pollution, belly bloat and toothpick legs, war and pestilence and cold greed is emperor: survival is greed. And then—how had Dr. Poole put it?—a solitary man walking some place where it's wild and quiet. Merrihew had time to get a glimpse of a man like that in a place like that and think that it might after all be that way when Dr. Poole had to go and say, "They were all white."

MERRIHEW hadn't gotten to be what he was by being uncool—and it could be that he looked the part. But once in his life a flashbulb had gone off in his face in a dark room and once someone he had loved had died in his arms and once he had had to blow the whistle on the best friend he ever had, who died of it. This thing he had just heard was like all those at once; it made him bite his tongue the same way. It could be that he heard nothing at all for a long moment because he didn't want to hear anything else; he wanted to tip time backward and not know what he had just been told. He came

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back slowly—as if someone had a volume control to bring up sound gradually from silence—and heard Dr. Poole say something about cloud formation.

"There's a central mountain range and, like all such, it has cloud cover most of the day. Lasvogel thinks the chemical fog went in over the city and upslope on a thermal current. He really had no idea the stuff would work in dilutions like that, but it did. When it got to the cloud it dispersed right through it in a few hours—well, he had anticipated that part. Then, of course, it rained. It rains every day in that place for a little while. It was the rain that brought it down on the lee side—so, you see, the whole place was covered.

Merrihew recognized a flicker of surprise in himself when he tried his voice and it worked. "Anybody live in those mountains—or are they all in the city?"

"I see what you're thinking," Dr. Poole said. "Maybe we missed someone. Well, forget it. Yes, there are villages and small holdings all through the area. But you've got to accept what I said: we've had the whole place bugged for years now—crossroads clinics, private doctors, the pathological labs and the midwives. Trust the figures."

"How big is the white population?"

"Less than five percent. Two couples from the Peace Corps who settled there, some teachers and doctors, business people. Also some East Indian settlements and orientals. No pregnancies there either. Just Caucasians."

Merrihew's steak was cold. He put his fork down. "Too big to get hold of all at once. You're taking a hell of a chance telling anyone about this. Even me."

"Stick that in your cap for a feather. The record says you can be trusted."

Merrihew looked him in the eye. "Nobody can be trusted with this one. All I can do is the best I can. Let's get back to work."

"Work? Ah. Your part in this, you mean. All I can tell you is what needs to be done and let you take it from there. I can't tell you what to do." He smiled briefly. "From what I hear, nobody can. That's how you work."

"Lasvogel," Merrihew said tersely. He meant, *Get to the point.*

"Very well. Lasvogel is the key to everything. He's on the track of an answer and he will come through—although maybe I say that because I have no alternative. But I'm afraid he won't last the stretch. He's under some kind of pressure that's brought him to the breaking point and I'm scared."

"I'm scared just hearing about it."

"Oh, you don't understand. It isn't West Ecuador. I know the

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man. I've seen him under stress—work stress—before. This is something different. Something outside. It isn't physical—I have the right to order an examination and I did that, though I thought he was going to spit in my eye. All I got out of that is what I already knew—he's under stress. Dr. Genovese—the Institute head medic—laid it to work pressure and told him to ease up, told me to ease up, too. But I know better."

"How?"

Dr. Poole almost shrugged, almost gestured, barely shook his head. "Call it intuition. Call it my special talent the way you'd call Lasvogel's problem-solving a special talent. We give things names and think we have answers. They aren't answers but sometimes they make us feel better." He drew a deep breath. "Anyway, your problem is Lasvogel. Find out what's cutting him up and give me an idea of what can be done about it. Your problem is *not* West Ecuador. He'll handle that. Here." He removed an envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to Merrihew. "Here's a personnel profile plus all the addresses, telephone numbers and peripheral information you can possibly need. Numbers you can reach me twenty-four hours a day—and don't hesitate on that one. A drawing account. It doesn't say so on the paper, but believe me, it's open-ended. And I've bothered to write one thing down in red: *Respect Lasvogel's privacy*. He's obsessive about that. He must never have the slightest suspicion that you're on the job or what the job is. I can put it to you this way: he's the most totally devoted and conscientious man I have ever met, but if he thought he was being spied on, he'd quit the Institute—West Ecuador and all. The only other thing I have to say to you is something that doesn't need saying: God help us if West Ecuador goes on much longer the way it is. Already there will have to be a wrinkle in the birth statistics that some sharp eyes will pick up. Imagine nine months from now when the news gets out that there's a place where there have been no non-white births in a population of two million. You feel all right, Merrihew?"

Merrihew stood up. "I feel we've been sitting here too long. Talking too much."

"But –"

"You said it was all in here," and Merrihew tapped the envelope. "You better be right." And he ran out.

II

SLIT-EYED, thin-lipped, Merrihew went straight to a place he knew and began to work.

The place was a park bench off the mall, in a little hollow over-

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arched by linden trees. Aside from turning pages from the envelope, which took him less than twenty minutes, he sat motionless, legs splayed out, eyes all but closed, for nearly two hours.

There were things about this job which ran 180° out of phase with the way he worked, the way he thought. Don't think of exactly where West Ecuador is, what it is (although "prevailing wind situation" and "central range with cloud cover . . . it rains every day there" and the population and birth-rate figures put a pin right on its map); don't think of the nature of that fog and its power in incredible dilutions like that and just what that stuff had to be; it was Lasvogel's job to work with that—and anyway, Merrihew genuinely doubted that any wild inspiration of his could even approach Lasvogel's grasp of the variables involved. Don't think of ways and means of discovering from Lasvogel himself what it was that was pulling him apart. Superbrain he might be, but Merrihew doubted he was so unlike other human beings as to be always aware of what was wrong with him. He probably didn't know.

Merrihew liked to work with cross-checkable facts, and with the truth (whatever, from time to time, the hell that might be. In this case he had to work with "meta-facts" and treat them as if they were axioms, knowing perfectly well they weren't. For example, Lasvogel was the only man who could solve the West Ecuador mess. Merrihew doubted that, but could not let that doubt dilute his efforts. And this one: the West Ecuador mess can be solved. Merrihew doubted this too, but must refuse to let that thought into the gears. And this: the difference between Lasvogel's ability and inability to solve the West Ecuador problem lay in keeping him from falling apart. Merrihew was perfectly aware that Lasvogel might well solve the problem before he, Merrihew did anything; or that he, Merrihew, might pass a miracle and restore Lasvogel to soundness of mind and soul and still Lasvogel might not be able to find an answer.

So all his reasoning and actions must spring from this sequence of assumptions and almost-facts as if they were the word of God, or at least Moses. On top of which, whatever he did had to be done instantly and effectively, for literally every second made it more likely that the news would get out.

The news would get out . . .

He stirred uneasily on the bench: he squirmed. Just the fact—no details, no hows or wheres—just the terrible fact that someone had a substance that would secretly and painlessly sterilize everyone on Earth except Caucasians. Who wouldn't jump at that—jump in horror, in greed, even in joy, in

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terror? It wouldn't matter what details were lacking: that which is stated as possible is done. A microscopic amount of uranium is split leaving its streaks through a half cupful of smoke, and once the news is out, the thing is done—years later, perhaps, billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of man-hours later, but it gets done and the world is never the same again. A man drops dead, seated at his desk. There is a bullet wound. There is a hole in the window glass. The detective draws a line from a man's head, as he sits at the desk, through the hole. Ballistics experts alter it to the correct parabola and learn where the gun was that fired the shot—and so on—until a murderer is captured. Let it be known that a thing has been done and it will be known how it was done—if anyone cares enough.

And who would care enough about what had happened at West Ecuador? Blacks and bigots. Clever-mouthed haters, masking their diseased passions under a cant of believable ecology. And if a weapon so potent and so selective could be analyzed, why couldn't it be made to select another target? And if that proved impossible, was there any way to measure the rage of the target now established?

Merrihew had a thought—permitted the thought—purely to know he had had it and that he had eliminated it. Take it to the military, to a wealthy bigot, to the potential victims of the most horrifying exercise of genocide known to history—even human history. One might say conscience would dictate something like the last course—as for the others, there would be fortune incalculable, power immeasurable for a man who held what he had and used it for his own ends.

Merrihew shuddered and spat.

Work. Work. Get to work . . .

He sat there for another twenty minutes.

"For God's sake," he said then. "What a way to save the world."

IT WAS all very discreet, of course, and in the delicate mention of it in Dr. Poole's envelope, the words had all but blushed. The fact sheet held a strange mix of old-world disapproval and latter-day acceptance, combined with an arch appetite for gossip. What it came down to was that Lasvogel had, in addition to a cerebellum, some gonads, and that these had been preoccupied for some time by one Katrin Szabo, expatriate Hungarian, twenty-four years old, a mathematician employed by the Institute and living in the same apartment house on the same floor as Lasvogel. "His association with Miss Szabo," said the fact sheet primly, "is regarded strict-

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ly as Dr. Lasvogel's concern and not the Institute's business"—thereby making it Merrihew's.

What a way to save the world . . .

Merrihew, having carefully checked the whereabouts of the parties involved, went to the apartment house where Lasvogel lived, repeating to himself like a mantra: *Lasvogel's privacy must be respected. Lasvogel's privacy must . . .* Oh, he didn't give a damn for Lasvogel's privacy. Not now. What the mantra meant was that Lasvogel must not be underestimated. A mind that could do that many things in that many fields was one that would pick up the slightest trace of spying—and that one trace would blow the whole bit. Merrihew could hardly contain West Ecuador in his memory—he most certainly did not want it on his conscience. Anything he did in this operation would have to be by remote control. Anyone he moved or diverted must be handled invisibly and without touching.

In an alley—not the one behind the apartment house—Merrihew became a telephone repairman, locked his car and went into Lasvogel's building through the service entrance. The lock on the fire tower was a simple matter for him. Trudging up eight flights of stairs was not. He used the simple rhythm of climbing to reinforce his mantra.

The eighth-floor hallway was deserted and had an admirably soft carpet. He ghosted up to the door of Apartment 8K and tried the knob, recalling a nightmarish time he had once had picking a lock that wasn't locked. This one was and it was a good one. He glanced at the key slot and from his belt drew out a flat case, opened it. From one side he took out the correct blank and slid it into the slot. From the other side he selected an array of flat blades, chose one, and gently thrust it into the special recess in the blank, applying turning pressures, forward and back, as he did so. His sensitive fingers told him which serration on the blade moved which tumbler and how much. He withdrew the blade and tried another. the third one did it and the door opened. He went in and closed it quietly behind him.

Soundlessly, he whistled.

Nobody, but nobody, could be this neat.

Carefully, avoiding the rugs where possible, he trod the whole place, the whole bare minimal totally efficient place.

Here was where a man could keep his changes of clothes, could wash, could sleep (alone), could eat if he wanted to but usually didn't. Here he apparently did not relax, did not entertain, did not read or watch TV (there was none) and did not even study. Well, a man like Lasvogel probably did all his

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studying in his head. He didn't need books, and if it was facts he wanted, he had two telephones. The one with no number on it was certainly an open line to the Institute.

Merrihew found nothing out of place, nothing not strictly Lasvogel's, except the note on the dinette table.

It was triangular, blue, dated, and cuter'n hell:

Welcome, welcome, wherever you are. Problem: to make perfect beef Stroganoff exactly as you like it, without knowing when you'll come. Need one ingredient: Dearest you. Waiting,

LEANING over the table to read it without touching it, Merrihew noticed the funny little crossbar on the 7 of the date, European style, and could admire the firm, strong, straight, yet completely feminine handwriting. He backed off a pace to look at the note from a distance. From the way it was placed on the table, he had a strong feeling that it had not been read and tossed there. It had been so carefully centered most likely by the sender, not the receiver.

And the date?

Yesterday.

He continued his hands-off inventory: bathroom (where he detected moisture not only on the toothbrush but on the soft bristles of an old-fashioned badger shaving brush) and in the tiny kitchenette, where he made his big find.

It—they, rather, were in the cupboard over the chopping block. The small spice rack contained salt, pepper, seasoned salt, seasoned pepper—and that was all. Beside the rack was an array of vitamin capsules—B complex, glutamic acid and the usual vitamin-mineral once-a-day pill. What faintly caught his eye, just as he turned away, was a glimpse of something stashed behind the little spice rack.

Feeling that perhaps he was carrying caution to a ludicrous extreme—yet silently chanting his mantra again—Merrihew got out his needle-beam torch and peeked. He had to be mildly acrobatic to be able to read the labels, but what he found was vitamins—two bottles. One was B complex and iron, the other Vitamin E. Unlike the B complex out front, which bore the name of a reputable drug-store chain, these hidden ones were from *Let's Live!*—one of those natural-food emporia of which Merrihew, a confirmed carnivore, once had said, "They sell fruits and nuts to the nuts and fruits." It happened that he knew this one; it wasn't far from his office.

What the hell was Lazvogel doing in a place like that? And why should he have bought more when

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he already had had (Merrihew bent to check) two thirds of a bottle of B Complex? And if Lasvogel were simply storing this new bottle—why wasn't the Vitamin E out front?

It looked almost as if he had hidden them.

Resisting the temptation to find out if the bottles really were the genuine article—for the screw-on caps were sealed with shrunk plastic—Merrihew turned away and scanned the counters, the miniscule stove. In the wastebasket was a piece of paper –a small bag with the colophon of the *Let's Live!* store on it. Merrihew's eye photographed just how it lay before he reached down and took it by the smallest possible corner and lifted it out.

Handwriting.

> One of these you really need. So much better for you. Please take them. The other one you don't need at all (!!!) Please take them away!
>
> *Love and love*
> *Ruthie*

Merrihew replaced the crumpled bag in the wastebasket precisely as he had found it, took one more careful look at the whole place and let himself out.

In the envelope Dr. Poole had given him there was no Ruthie. Hm.

He walked softly down the hall, checking his watch. Still plenty of time. He let himself into Apartment 8D rather more quickly.

APARTMENT 8D was much more to his taste. In its way as well ordered as Lasvogel's, it was warm, colorful and lived-in—lived-in, too, by someone who could own a green glass pear and the portrait of a smiling collie because they were beautiful and not because they did anything. The kitchenette was no longer than Lasvogel's but marvelously equipped and organized. The bed could sleep two and the presence of drapes and spreads, rugs and cushions had eliminated that acoustically-live effect Lasvogel's place generated, wherein one's very thoughts echoed and there was nothing to absorb a human error. Merrihew, while retaining his detachment, could not control the thought that if Lasvogel was throwing this away he ought to have his glands candled.

Against one wall was a drop-leaf table, serving as a desk but ready to be used for meals. It bore at the moment a block of triangular notepaper, blue. He ran a fingertip lightly over its edges and nodded. Practical, too. This was Institute stationery with the letterhead guillotined off (making a square) and cut again on the diagonal, making that charming triangular paper.

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A piece of it lay on the desk, a felt-tipped pen next to it. In the strong feminine handwriting he had seen on Lasvogel's table, he read:

Actually I have no claim on you in any way, not even in the simple matter of expecting promises to be kept, and there is obviously no reason for me to oh, damn, what's the USE . . .

The last words sprawled across the paper—he could see where the violent pen had run clear off onto the table top.

Merrihew's eyebrows twitched. Time was when he might have raised them. This was obviously the end of a long series. The rest should be—ahh.

The wastebasket was half full of them. The ones on top were unruffled, the ones lower down crushed, the ones at the very bottom torn into little bits or twisted into tight little knots.

It must have been a long night.

He sampled the many drafts.

Cheerful: *Hello there! Remember me? I'm the one with the secret vice—elaborate beef Stroganoff alone in my room. This could lead to—*

Indignant: *It may be that there are things in your life far more important than—*

Comic: *HELP! I am a prisoner in a Stroganoff factory!*

Comitragic: *To whom it may concern: I am an orphaned beef Stroganoff. Nobody wants me. My noodles are withered and my gravy cold.*

Tragicomic: *Oh pity the poor mathematician with her shining hair brushed bright and the bed turned down, the wine untouched and the Stroganoff cleaving to the cold old chafing-dish—*

Distraught: *Perhaps I needed this. In no other way could I have learned how much I want you, need you. It's so much more than mutual pleasure and the joy of your nearness. I should be angry but instead I'm grateful, but oh, it hurts—*

Furious: *You rotten bastard, you icy son of a bitch, whatever gave you the idea that you could treat me like—*

Maternal: *Nothing matters if you're all right, my dear. There will be other times—any time you say—or none. If I can help in any way, I'm here. If I can help most by leaving you alone while you work things out, I'll do that. But I am rather desperately worried about you. Please eat.*

"Bastard," Merrihew murmured as he carefully replaced the papers in the wastebasket.

It must have been a long night.

III

HE WONDERED if she had used her key and how often, "her shining hair brushed bright

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—" she had run down the hall to that monkish cell, only to find it dark and silent and her welcoming note unread on his table? Had she dozed off some time in the early hours and awakened, stiff and cramped at her writing table, to run down once more and perhaps done as Merrihew had just done—checked the untenanted cot and the damp toothbrush, realizing that Lasvogel had come home in the gray light to wash and change and leave again—smelling probably of another woman's perfume? Smelling of organic soy sauce and sesame seed, rather, Who the hell was Ruthie?

What was a guy like Lasvogel, with the fate of a whole planet in his hands, doing with two absolutely superfluous time-consuming body-and-mind-consuming entanglements like this.

Merrihew thought about those organic vitamins.

One of them you need . . .

That would be the B complex. These health nuts were ape for B complex and the synthetics just would not do.

. . . you don't need the other one, but take them anyway.

Oh, boy. There used to be a whole megillah about the language of the flowers, you'd send irises and a rose and a hunk of Queen Anne's lace and it meant I am panting for you, or some such. Nowadays you bring a bottle of pills.

You don't need these (!!!). . .

Oh, this Ruthie, she is a cutie. Everyone knows Vitamin E's the wildest thing since the prairie oyster and Spanish fly. Lasvogel, you busy, busy boy, you. So you have a date with this Hungarian slipstick and her Stroganoff and instead you're out all night with your dish of yogurt and her triple exclamation points—and you with all that homework to do. And you bring home your trophies and hide them because you know the other chick has a key.

And suddenly Merrihew knew what he must do. He knew it as he knew that he must do it absolutely invisibly.

He had not the compunctions, here in Katrin Szabo's apartment, that he had had in Lasvogel's austere environment; yet when he used the telephone he was careful not to move it and to hold the receiver with his handkerchief. He got his number.

"Let's live!" said the telephone.

"Hey man, amen," said Merrihew, who hated people who said "man!" "Is Ruthie there?"

"You mean Ruthie Gordoni."

"Godbless, man." *You just told me what I wanted to know.* But Merrihew didn't say that last part out loud. "Look around and see is she there for me, man."

A pause, then: "Not here. Wish she was," the telephone added garrulously. "This is a whole different place when she walks in. Some-

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one said just last night she's a regular Earth Mother."

"Far out," said Merrihew, who hated people who say "far out." "She's the one turned me on to your B and liver. I wanted to find her and thank her, man. I'm really somebody different, man."

"That's Ruthie," said the telephone with pride and joy. "Well she lives right across the street, so she'll be in. Who shall I say—"

"I'll fall by myself soon, man. I'm never out of porkfat molasses anyway."

"Blackstrap."

"That's what I said, man. So later, man."

"Right on," said the telephone fashionably and Merrihew hung up. He glared sourly at it. "Far goddam out, man," he murmured and went looking for the phone book.

He found what he wanted and then, pausing only long enough to check out the whole place for his spoor and finding none, he let himself out and returned through the deserted hallway to Lasvogel's door, which he now opened in even less time than he had the girl's. He was there only long enough to fish the *Let's Live!* bag out of the wastepaper basket and, in an absolutely perfect copy of her handwriting, add the earth-mother's last name and street address to her arch little note. He did not, however, put it back. He left it on the floor beside the basket. In that environment it shouted, it screamed, it stood out like an oil-spill on a talcum beach.

He went back to his office and called Dr. Poole. "Finished," he told that startled gentleman. "I got to tell you this: he'll get worse before he gets better—and if you try to do anything about it you'll screw everything up. And if you call me to tell me bad things have happened to him I'll just say I know, I know."

Dr. Poole said, "But—"

Merrihew was already saying, "Goodbye."

He then went where phones couldn't reach him for a while.

What a way to save the world.

THE WAITER went away with the order and Merrihew shot a look at Dr. Poole. He looked older, a little, though it had been barely three weeks since the last time. He also looked a hell of a lot happier.

"I can't tell you exactly what he did, of course," said Dr. Poole.

Merrihew nodded understandingly.

"Secrets, secrets," he said.

"Nonsense, man! There are two kinds of secrets—the security kind, where someone mustn't find out something or you'll get hurt—and the other kind, where you're expected to explain polymer transformations to a four-year-old. You just *can't*. So as one four-year-old to another, I can

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merely bumble to you about DNA analogs, a chemical integument forming temporarily around ripe ova, selectivity rather like the clumping that forms sickle cells—and an overlooked environmental factor."

"You mean there's no smog in West Ecuador."

"Jesus! How did you know that?"

"You told me. Most of it at lunch that time. I mean, West Ecuador could only be one place in the whole world, from what you told me. And now you mentioned 'an overlooked environmental factor.' "

"Ah. Ah." Dr. Poole nodded vehemently. "Good thing we—he cleared it up as soon as he did. Anyway, it's reformulated completely and if anyone should ever make the same mistake again we can straighten it out in a matter of hours. To put it as simply as possible, we now have something which nullifies conception in any warm-blooded vertebrate—but only for the current cycle. It doesn't affect the cycle either and it has no side effects. It can be taken as an individual dose or fogged—the way we did it at West Ecuador—to affect millions. We can bend the population curve downward anywhere—to any degree."

"And now who gets it? Government? U.N.? Or just you?"

"You don't want to know that."

"You're right."

The drinks came. Rather happily they silently toasted one another. "Now," said Dr. Poole, "tell me. How did you do it? Matter of fact, what did you do?"

"Maybe I should keep my secrets, too."

"There are two kinds of secret," Dr. Poole reminded him.

Most uncharacteristically, Merrihew laughed. He did not do it very well. Not enough practice. "*Touché*. Un—I drew a hell of a slice out of that account you set up. I wouldn't want you to regret paying out all that money for the little I did."

Dr. Poole waved that away. "There's an old story about a mechanic who fixed a big rotary printing press by going inside and whacking something once with a hammer. He billed for $2500.25, and when they asked for an accounting and itemization, he said the quarter was for whacking it with the hammer. The $2500 was for knowing where to whack."

"Goddam," said Merrihew. "I was going to tell you that very same story."

"Tell me what you did."

"I studied your envelope pretty carefully. Your Lasvogel shows an interesting pattern. He's a multitalented man—and I don't think his talents are completely under his conscious control. Some people blow up under stress. Some people sharpen up.

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Lasvogel sharpens. The tougher the problem—and/or the more urgent—the sharper he gets. The West Ecuador problem could hardly have been tougher or more urgent. Every second it got more so. Lasvogel, I think, began to get a little frantic. I think that maybe for the first time in his life he began to feel that the problem wasn't going to produce enough pressure to squeeze out an answer. It began to show."

"Oh, it did," breathed Dr. Poole.

Merrihew said, "I don't for a minute believe that Lasvogel consciously realized why he then did what he did. Which was to go out and get himself another chick."

THE waiter came, puttered, chuntered and ultimately went away, during which whole time Dr. Poole frowned unseeingly at the puttering and chuntering.

"I suppose," he said when they were private again, "that he needed to get his mind off the—"

"He got a new chick without getting rid of the old one," said Merrihew. "There is in all the world no more certain way for a man to get himself into trouble than that. There's no more efficient method for a man to complicate things for himself, to face more unpredictable and unmanageable hassle."

"And you were able to stop it."

"Haven't you been listening? My God, you know him better than I do or ever will! Lasvogel has total confidence in his ability-and he had total devotion to the West Ecuador problem. I mean he knew the answer was in there somewhere and he knew he wasn't getting enough pressure out of the work. Even if it was about to squash him flat it still wasn't enough to make the answer come. So he just went out and bought more pressure."

"Without knowing why?"

"I really don't think so," said Merrihew. "Consciously knowing it would make it game-playing, not real—and the pressures then wouldn't be real either. Which is why playing tricks on yourself never works."

"Incredible. So—what did you do?"

"Nothing essential. What happened was inevitable, so in a way you didn't need me at all. On the other hand, I did make the inevitable happen a hell of a lot sooner, which is why you got your problem solved when you did."

"Why we got it solved, period," Dr. Poole asserted warmly. "Lasvogel was at the bitter end, believe me."

"You'd know," conceded Merrihew. "I don't—I never saw the guy. Or the chicks. That was the only real trouble I had—making it happen without touching anybody. So I just did what you scientist types called bringing in a force or factor which is necessary and

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sufficient. I saw to it that the two girls got to know each other. I knew your Miss Szabo was due home before Lasvogel, and that she would sit down and brood a bit, that she would get mad and barge into his place—and that she would not only see the evidence I left for her but would snatch it up and take it away with her."

"What evidence?"

"The other woman's name and address."

"But how would that guarantee—"

"It was guaranteed, if you know Miss Szabo."

"You seem to have gotten to know her quite well."

"Never saw her," said Merrihew, watching, behind his eyes, a succession of careful blue triangles, lines of strong, angry, devoted, injured handwriting. "But in a way you're right. I knew she'd go straight there and have it out."

"What happened?"

"We'll never know. Whatever it was, Lasvogel walked in on it."

"That must have been the night he limped into the lab with the scratches on his face and the big bruise on his cheekbone."

"Language of love," said Merrihew. "One of 'em."

"And by morning he had the new formulation."

"Pressure enough," said Merrihew, spreading his hands in a Q.E.D. gesture. "Necessary and sufficient."

"Oh, dear," said Dr. Poole thoughtfully.

"What is it?"

"I can't complain, I suppose. I said before—you heard me—that if Lasvogel solved this one he could retire with honor. In effect he probably has—and we won't be getting much from him from now on."

"Why?"

Dr. Poole leaned forward with his I-don't-gossip-but-you-should-know expression. "This wouldn't be a Miss Ruth Gordoni?"

"No," said Merrihew. "Ruthie."

"Ah. Well, Lasvogel has moved, you know. Taken a house. And according to my sources Miss Szabo has moved in with him. And, ah, Miss Gordoni also. They seem to have become fast friends, all three."

And Merrihew really did laugh, this time. "Friend," he said, putting his hand on Dr. Poole's shoulder, "You're going to get work out of Lasvogel like you never got before. And he's still got a lot to do if the totalitarian principle of physics inherent in this mess is to be kept permanently at bay. It goes something like this: 'Anything not forbidden is compulsory . . . ' He's found a way to keep the pressure on and an environment that won't even let him get sick. Beef Stroganoff with Vitamin E sauce—" and he dissolved into laughter again and wouldn't explain. ★

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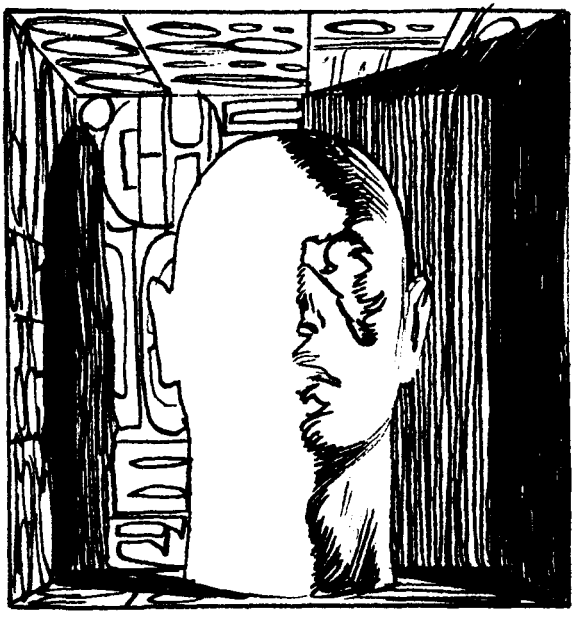

TAKEOVER

ERNEST TAVES

The Thing underground ruled men's dreams, desires and destinies—but not yet every woman's passions . . .

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I'M AIRBORNE, flying through a crystal night, and unbidden ideas and thoughts keep wandering into and out of my head. These they are ordinarily wont to do, but more now than usually. *Par exemple*: I think of Saint-Ex doing his thing over the Andes—and over France, over other places. Just now I'm doing some kind of thing over mid-U.S.A. and unbidden thoughts come into my mind. I think of my first girl, the really first one, and I'm filled with something like shame because suddenly I can't remember her name. She was good to me and you shouldn't forget the name of the first girl who was good to you. I'm not always proud of myself. My real now girl, though, is beside me as we fly through the night, and I know her name right well: Alice.

I think, among other things, of reading: reading my way through grade school, through high school, even into college. Reading in the lofts of barns in August, in cold libraries in November and once—a special time—reading in a secret place where the only things that mattered at all were being with my girl and—before and after that—reading lovely things *together*. That was before Alice.

When I was a kid (this is one of the thoughts wandering into my head as I look at the lights below and think of reading) there already had been too many computer legends. I read them because I had an interest. In most the computers were taking over the world, running everything—you know.

I checked an old favorite the other night and it began like this: *The Computer broods in a cavern in a mountain not far from Denver, Colorado. It has no name, needing none. It needs no name because it's the only one . . .*

It was a good story, but it hadn't been quite right; in the actual event the locus was closer to Colorado Springs than to Denver. And when I, in due course, made the acquaintance of The Computer I found that it wasn't the only one, just the only one in what we persist in calling the Western World. There were two others, in the expected two other places; such, however, were the linkages between them that, when you got right down to it, the three were one organism.

I discovered that The Computer really did brood, deep within its cavern, because it didn't have much to do. It ran the world, yes, but that didn't begin to stretch it to capacity. It strained like a mint-condition old Offy would strain at 40 MPH. It wasn't mountain-size, of course, but it was inside a mountain for reasons of security. Quite a bit of it was at work from time to time, but mostly the work was routine, a drag, and the part of it that didn't have anything to do—brooded. How else can you think of it?

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The Computer was made mostly by young men and was programmed to trust no one under thirty. And how did I come into all this? I say (with mixed feelings) that my great-grandfather, when a young man, was one of the big brains behind it. And my grandfather and father had worked for it, so I had a family interest as well as a personal one.

I turned to Alice.

"Do you remember my thirtieth birthday," I asked.

"I do," she said.

Sunlight through an unopenable window and conditioned air into the house from points beyond counting. A spring day and in the room a mother and her lively young girl of eight.

"I want to go to the park," the girl says. Her name is Jean. Jean's mother sighs, reflecting upon the mixed-bag quality of the times when Jean is not required to be in school. "We went four days ago."

"I want to go again," Jean says. "I want to walk on the grass with my shoes off."

"That would be nice, Jean, but I think it's too soon. Well, push the button."

The girl knew precisely where, in the complex array of buttons, the one labeled *Park* was. She carefully crossed her fingers before pushing the familiar button. Events took place in silicon chips in Colorado and the light came up red.

"I'm sorry, darling. We'll be able to go again soon. We have to share it. You know." The girl kicked the base of the panel. "Don't do that, Jean."

Jean stood at the window and looked out into the park. There were people in it—not too many, not too few, just the right number.

I'll be thirty tomorrow and after that I'll be spending four hours a day inside that Colorado mountain, looking after one module of that Thing. The part I'll be responsible for is no larger than a small library, but it's reasonably complex and I don't expect to be bored.

Maintenance is compartmented. I'm supposed to know everything about my module, or section (219A), down to the last microscopic memory chip, but nothing about any other.

I've said that three of my immediate ancestors were related to The Computer. I want to go inside that mountain.

"You have decided on your project?"

The man behind the desk smiled, put the tips of his fingers together, looked

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from the face of the boy to the ceiling, then back. The boy was fourteen and his name was Emile. Derek Arpel, the man behind the desk, was Emile's science teacher. He saw something in the boy's eyes and didn't look at the ceiling again.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm going to build a model of the Tower of the Eight Winds."

"The Tower of—"

"Yes. A working model. I think I can do it. It will have eight sides, you know, one for each of the eight winds, and each will be a sundial and inside the tower will be a water clock, like this."

Emile unfurled large unruly sheets of paper, which bore beautifully done drawings. Derek Arpel cleared his throat and made as if to swallow. He hummed a little and said meaningless monosyllables.

"The reservoir for the water clock will be here," the boy said, speaking rapidly. "It must always be full, so the pressure will be constant. It will be such fun," he said. He showed, talking all the time, how the water would flow from the reservoir into another tank, filling it in just twenty-four hours. "This is a float in the tank," he said, "and a line from the float goes here—and there—and as the float rises this plate goes around, once every twenty-four hours. There will be a chart of the sky drawn on it. The marker—this grid—shows what time it is. It will be held by Hercules on one side, Atlas on the other—here."

He stopped to catch his breath. Derek Arpel looked at the drawings and looked at Emile. He shook his head slightly.

"I didn't make it up myself," Emile said. "It's a copy."

"Where—"

"In the rare book vault of the library. In an old *American Journal of Archaeology*. It's on tape."

"You are authorized?"

"Oh, yes." He showed the Teacher a card.

"I meant," the Teacher said, "where was the—original Tower of the Eight Winds?"

"In Athens," Emile said, squaring his narrow shoulders. "First Century BC, old time. Do you think it will—go, sir?" Emile looked into the old man's eyes, saw something flickering there. "It would be so beautiful."

"Yes. Yes," said the

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Teacher. "I believe it would be so. All right, you know what you have to do." He waved a hand toward the console and the boy seated himself before it. He recited his prepared copy into the mike and events happened upon and within the silicon wafers in the mountain. The answer wasn't long in coming.

The boy rolled up his plans, crumpled the copy of his proposal in his fist.

"It would have been a lovely thing," he said.

MY THIRTIETH birthday came on a Saturday, which meant that my new job, for which I'd been so endlessly trained, would start on the following Monday. I suggested to Alice that a celebration was in order. She said she wasn't so sure.

I asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't mind moving to Colorado, and you know it, but I don't like the idea of you working for that—Thing. I hate it."

This wasn't new territory; we had crisscrossed it before. We had lived with it for a while.

"It's a little late to do anything about it now," I said. "So let's make do with it at least until we see how it goes. All right?"

"I don't like it. Who says you have to work for The Computer anyway?"

I sighed and said the Computer. And that ended that.

The ages of eighteen and twenty-one had, I knew, historically been ages of significance, but they didn't mean much now. Thirty was the dividing line and I found that I crossed that threshold in a state of some internal conflict. I won't say that part of me didn't look forward to my new job—didn't, in fact, insist that that was obviously what I had to do. My emotional view of the Computer was as yet amorphous, a coin with blurred images on either side, images which would no doubt sharpen in due course. On the negative side, I didn't like the red lights and, though I'm no philosopher, I was obscurely uneasy about the implications of those red lights, what they said other than, *No, you can't do that now, not today*. On the other side was—well, not much, but The Computer *did* run in the family and I did, though Alice was genuinely unhappy about it, want to go into the mountain.

Time first, though, for champagne, a few friends and desultory conversation before they left. My birthday, yes. As guests (almost always) eventually do, ours left, and I was soon in bed with Alice. I was tired and it was nice to stretch, sleepy head on pillow, feeling her stretching against me.

"Nice party," I mumbled, "but

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I'm glad they went when they did."

"Yes," Alice said. "Yes." She snuggled and one thing in inevitable sequence led to another and I wasn't tired any more. "Push the button, damn it, dear Harry. You know we have to do that."

"Yes, I do," I said, fooling around some more. I do, indeed."

I got myself out of bed and over to the console. Before pushing the appropriate button I thought a moment, seeking wisdom from anomalous sources. In a day and a half I'd be going into that mountain, whose guts I was now about to address.

"Harry?"

I pushed the button. Condition red. I crawled back into bed.

"Red?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Screw it," she said. "Damn it, screw it." But you can't screw The Computer. The converse wasn't quite true. Before I was able to settle down much she said, "So let's do it anyway."

We'd been through this before, too, though Alice was a very bright girl.

"You know we can't," I said. Sensorship. Alice knew as well as I that if we made love then and there, in the voyeuristic presence of that red signal, the little sensor within both our selves would signal *Violation* and soon unpleasant consequences would flow from that.

"Why not?" asked Alice, not resigned. "Why can't we? When we both feel like it. It's your birthday—"

"It's all optimized," I said. "Frequency as a function of age, temperament, twenty other factors. You know that as well as—"

"Damn it to hell," she said. "You can bet your sweet life on one thing, that computer doesn't know *my* optimums from its—"

"It's what?"

"It doesn't have one." She sat in bed next to me, her strawberry nipples darting accusatory glances my way, and said, "I want you. Now. Let's do it anyway."

"Listen, love," I said, though I knew I fought a lost cause. "Listen—I love you more than I can say. I do. But on Monday I go into the mountain, and I can't have The Computer in dispute with me now. Or vice versa. Understand that."

And she tried to. And she snuggled against me, but angrily, and there was no comfort in it.

MY TRAINING had been thorough, elaborate and extensive, all of it carried out with the help of a presumably authentic and life-size copy of the module over which I would preside. This apparatus was housed in one fairly large room of an unobtrusive installation not far from the mountain. There were other places like it here and there throughout the country, I knew, but mine was the

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only one I had ever seen. Curiosity about modules other than your own was not encouraged.

My own bucket of bolts, when I had finished training, had no secrets left to keep from me, not in respect of keeping it going, which was all my job was supposed to be. It itself didn't (it was always an *it* to me; I couldn't think of it as a he or she), but there were two small appendages, guarded chambers, I had no access to. One was input, the other was output—simulacra of the module's relationship to the rest of The Computer, of course.

The green light had come on Sunday night, but Alice was still sulky and it hadn't made any difference. The red light can stop you, but the green doesn't necessarily get you anywhere—in consequence of which I entered the mountain under two banners: animosity and curiosity.

The gadgetry was as expected. The few places I was allowed to enter responded either to my voice or to the pressure of the palm of my right hand upon a panel. These sensors made elevators go up or down and they opened some doors. Not all, by a long shot, but some. There were long corridors with forbidding portals, most of which were immune to the touch of my palm. Everything was battleship gray, which was fitting in view of the watertight bulkheading (I speak analogously) separating the different parts of The Computer. The whole thing, judging by what I could see of it, was surprisingly small.

What was it like to live with the thing, to have it part of my life for four hours a day, except I couldn't leave it at the end of the fourth hour; it stayed there through the other twenty as well? What was it like to be a part of the human apparatus that kept it going? What did I do? I'll tell you what it was like to live with it in a moment—but, first, what I did was detect malfunctioning circuits a few minutes before they malfunctioned. I wandered here and there amid all that hardware. I tired of sitting at the master console, waiting for something to happen. I felt the presence of all those silicon wafers, mindlessly bearing their microminiature circuits. I thought of the other rooms I couldn't get into. I thought of what was going on out there in consequence of what was going on in here.

What was it like to live with The Computer? It was, in the end, like living with your mother-in-law, whose untimely death you plan.

NOW and again the red light conflicted with my need—and now and then with Alice's—but most frequently with both at the same time and those were bad times. Occasionally, though, the green came at just the right time and we exploded into such a mutual pyro-

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technic brilliance that I wondered, briefly, if maybe The Computer had the right idea after all. That wonder never lasted long, only until the next red light.

Alice, of course, hated The Computer with frightening intensity. "And I hate your Great-great-God-damned-grandfather Charles H. Justice also," she would say, sitting in bed, looking at me. She didn't hate *me*—she loved me, dear girl—but I served The Computer and that came between us in both obvious and subtle ways. For one, she really didn't understand the extent to which the thing ran in the family.

"Not my great-great-grandfather," I would say. "Just great."

She hated him anyway.

My first months with The Computer were spent in a state of extreme ambivalence. Phase I, if you will, of The Computer And I. I admired The Computer, what it could do, how effortlessly it accomplished, what a magnificent something it was. I came, in a way, to be fond of it—to be fond, at least, of my part of it. My great-grandfather had been there, after all, and I was not immune to a sense of family pride.

I had anxieties enough the first day or two, but after the first week I was reasonably secure with my module and we began to develop our relationship. I liked the aseptic neatness of it all, the banks of indicator lights of many colors.

The other side of my attitude built itself upon the occasional red light The Computer gave me, us, and what that did to Alice and me, to *our* relationship—and, in the back of my mind, what it was doing to and for everybody else.

My function within the mountain was to *maintain* module 219A. My relation to The Computer was supposed to be analogous to that of the service technician who replaces the reactor in your aerocar, say, except that my job was more specialized. I was supposed to know everything there was to know about how to keep one small part of The Computer working, so others could use it. Actually I didn't—and don't—know if there are, or were, "others" in this sense. I was inclined to doubt it. I thought The Computer had become autonomous.

We were supposed to maintain, then, and to do so without curiosity, but I've already said I took curiosity inside the mountain with me that first day. So I did more than keep the thing running, I studied it. And one of the ways of studying it was to play back used chips before I sent them off from my module to wherever it was they went. This was, of course, against all regulation, but I had a recently acquired secret weapon and was able to bypass the monitoring circuits which would have signaled *Violation*...

My secret weapon, yes. After I'd

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been working for The Computer a month or so my father, who had been retired for years, called me from San Francisco. He had just gotten back from Japan and had forgotten my birthday until my mother reminded him of it. He had something for me and could I receive it without arousing notice or curiosity? He would like, he said, to have a look at 219A again (past-maintainers had that privilege), and could come to the mountain tomorrow. Besides, he said, he would like to see Alice and me. It's not a large package, he said.

"Why the cloak-and-dagger?" I asked.

"Never mind," he said.

"Will it go in a scooter?"

"Yes."

Communications like this were not monitored. The design intent and supposition were that the sensors everyone carried inside him/herself were all The Computer needed to keep things under control.

"Put it in my scooter in the lot at the mountain," I said, and I gave its number. "I'll smuggle it into the house later."

Security began at the one and only entrance into the mountain. There wasn't much need for it outside.

"Right," my father said. And the next day I had my secret weapon. That evening, after Alice was asleep (we'd had a pleasant enough visit with my father), I stashed it in a closet in my study.

And soon after that I was playing back memory chips. I couldn't bypass my internal sensor, not then, so I had to play it cool, which was usually not much of a problem since most of the business of running a world is rather dull stuff. But there were times when I found The Computer saying *No* when I thought it should say *Yes*. As for example, when the boy wanted to build The Tower of the Eight Winds. When I read the printout on that one, Phase I was finished. Phase I: ambivalence.

Phase II? Growing distrust and reorganization, as if a bright boy of six or seven, maybe, had discovered for the first time that his father wasn't always right.

I wouldn't want to make a general rule about what comes next in series that begin with ambivalance and progress to distrust and beyond, but in this case the next term was—simply—a mind-clutching need to destroy. Though Phase I had transmogrified in a matter of seconds into Phase II, the corresponding evolution into Phase III was undramatic and gradual. And irreversible.

What came into 219A were, in any large sense, trivia. Maybe trivia was all the input the other modules had as well, since everything was, shall we say, under control. People beyond counting wanted to cohabit and got the red light—and that was tiresome, but routine. A

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poet wanted to up his output to twenty-four lines a week—from twenty. Negative. A rather nice old man (or so he sounded) had made a mistake and wanted to go back to his first wife, they still loved each other. An *enfant terrible* tapped into The Computer a reasoned argument why man should resume the exploration of space. And so and so and so on.

The effect of these illicit playbacks was like the ancient Chinese water torture—small insults, each of them, but cumulating exponentially into an asymptotic need to undo the thing.

I mentioned control above. Yes. Many are the faces of immorality, and of these the dingiest calls itself control. Quoted, by permission, from the extensively unpublished Beatitudes of Harry S. Justice. Sorry about that name, by the way, but you can't help what you were born to.

I WAS in my study—studying, appropriately enough—and Alice was asleep. I was as deep as I could go into the lower left bowel of The Computer, learning more about (among other things) what a special module 219A was. At least I thought Alice was asleep, or I wouldn't have had the books out. But she wasn't—or she'd wakened—and she came in and surprised me. That let one cat out of the bag and our relationship changed in the next hour because I could see what was coming not far ahead. I wanted to level with her because she is a dear girl and I love her and it was time for me to share the burden, part of it. I was glad she had come in.

"What in the name of God," she asked, standing in the doorway, flimsily clad, hands on hips, concern in her eyes and love in her voice, "are you doing up so late—and what in the other name of God are *those*?"

She pointed to the three enormous volumes. I'd stashed them well. She had never seen them before, though our house was small.

My secret weapon.

"Sit down here," I said, touching her here and there, but my heart not in it, not then. "I'll make you a drink."

When I came back she was in the chair, small and huddled. I saw that I had communicated before I had said anything. I went to the bedroom, came back, put a wrap over her shoulders. She pulled up her feet. She was like a little girl. I sat in my chair at the desk.

"A good drink," I said, "though I made it myself." Alice started to say something. "These," I said, hamming it up a bit to keep it cool, "are the notebooks of my great-grandpappy, Charles H. Justice the First—" Alice's pupils dilated—"and they comprise, in effect, two entities." I had my audience, all right. *I hate your great-etc.-grandfather,* Alice had

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said from time to time. "One," I continued, "is, in all practical effect, a schematic of The Computer. The other is a dictionary to the language of the master program."

"But—" She seemed so small now, in the chair. So afraid.

"But I'm not supposed to have them—right," I said. "That's why they aren't on microfilm—there'd be a record, somewhere in that monster, of their existence. These are all from my grandpappy's own hand."

"When did you start calling him grandpappy?"

"Just now."

I had always admired Alice's astuteness. She rose from her chair, came to stand beside me and thumb through some of the pages. None of it meant anything to her, of course. Then she sat down again. We talked some more and I could see the wheels going around in her head like reels of tape in early-generation computers. She stood again, the wrap falling from her shoulders. She put her hands on my desk.

"Kill it then!" she cried, almost screamed. "Kill it!" She had begun to have an inkling of what I had going for me--us—in these notebooks and then she wasn't afraid, she was wild. Suddenly she checked herself and paled. "Christ," she said, "my stupid blood pressure, my so responsive heart rate. I have—"

She sat down, not, I thought, really afraid, but trying to keep her powder dry, not wanting to throw shock waves into the mountain—not now.

"It's all right," I said.

"How do you know? I may have—"

"Tonight it's all right," I said.

I made another drink and we talked some more, but I didn't tell her—I was saving that for later, to be told more by way of demonstration than by explication—that two days past I'd located and inactivated the receiver inputs of our own two personal sensors.

I also failed to mention that I had Charles H. Justice the First figured. These notebooks were grandpappy's moral insurance policy. When they'd put The Computer together back then they hadn't known how it would work out. Grandpap had tried to see to it that if it didn't, some descendant would be in the right place to take care of it. That's the way I put it together. There weren't any step-by-step instructions, though, no advice, just a comprehensive introduction to the totality of The Computer—a letter of credit, as it were, and I'd have to decide on my own how to spend it.

We had a long talk that night. On the way to bed I pushed the button. I demonstrated my intentions at once, in bed, despite the red light. Alice didn't know what to do.

"The console is on," I said,

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"but we, you and I, are disconnected. From The Computer, that is."

She didn't quite believe it at first, but when she did she gave it all she had. It was like being alone together for the first time ever—which isn't surprising, because that's what it was. Mercy!

"My dear sweet boy," Alice said, about to sleep. "You'll have to kill it anyway."

"Mmm," I mmmed.

"For all the others," she said.

FOUR hours a day don't take too much out of a man's life. I had plenty of time the next four weeks to study the notebooks. Not to Alice's dismay. She thought, though we didn't talk about it, that I was plotting the death of The Computer. She was right.

What are the ways of the death of a computer? Simple lack of maintenance would carry it off in reasonably short order, one malfunctioning circuit leading to the failure or inutility of others, until it progressed into rampaging psychosis or vegetating moronity, death in either case. But this computer's maintenance was impeccable. Theoretically The Computer could be programed to knock itself out, as if a human leaped from an aerocar for lack of anything better to do or because something or someone told him to do so. But The Computer had built-in safeguards which were, I knew, beyond the reach of me and my notebooks. There was, of course, always the simplest of all roads to destruction: force, man—brute force.

I WAS ready in four weeks. It took me that long, first to find what I was looking for, then to figure how to make it work. It was, if I may say so, a fancy piece of reprograming. I wondered if the other two parts of The Computer had equivalent 219A modules in them. I supposed so, but I didn't suppose either of them had a Harry S. Justice tinkering with their private parts.

All I told Alice was that we'd be taking off that evening in the aerocar. I gave her what would ordinarily have been a weird packing list—sleeping bags, as much of our heavier clothing as we could carry, lots of food, water, vodka, some books (no microfilms), simple medications, things like that.

"And any little thing you wouldn't want to lose," I said.

I had been, and was, curiously unable to talk to Alice during that time and I wasn't much good at talking to myself either. What do you say to yourself when you've fitted yourself into some kind of Great Archcriminal slot? Yes, there were things to be said on the other side. In spite of The Computer we still had the fear of the bomb

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hidden away in the corners of our minds and *that* wouldn't be there any more.

My last day in the mountain I voiced in the program just before I left. I suppose I hoped it would work. Some of the hardware was pretty old. But it was there, all right.

"Let's go," I said when I got home.

Alice was pale and tense, under control. She hadn't asked a question during those four weeks. I looked around the place a minute or so, and we got into the aerocar. The door clunked and I punched in the long-range coordinates for southwestern New Hampshire—that seemed a good a place as any and as far away as we could go. We got clearance in three minutes, I'd taken care of that, too.

At 23,000 feet Alice asked her first question. "Where are we going?"

I told her and she thought it over. She nodded, put her hand on mine for a minute.

Unamusing thoughts came to my mind, but I was detached from them, as if they didn't belong to me. How long would the North American power grid work? The

★★★GALAXY STARS★★★

Officially, J(ohn). R. Pierce is Executive Director of Research, Communication Sciences Division of Bell Labs. Unofficially, he is the father of Telstar. And officially, he appears in this issue of Galaxy with *The Exorcism*, a sequel to last month's *Choice*. And unofficially, he tells us, "I'd *really rather* write little moral tales than dicker with electronic prophecy."

Why is he widely considered Telstar's parent? Well, in 1955 he published the first paper on unmanned satellites, thus initiating the age of communication satellites. Urged by Pierce, NASA launched the original Echo satellite in 1960. Then AT&T, spurred by the enormous interest in that project, put five hundred people on the development of what became Telstar, launched in 1962.

Pierce has recently returned from Mexico where he delivered a talk on Computer Music. He composed—that is to say, programed—the music, and had computers perform it.

Next stop will be New York for a lecture at the annual meeting of the IEEE in March. The subject? Interconnecting computers over great distances and transferring data in information systems.

"We are all going to be using the computers in one way or another," he forecasts, "and they'll either make life easier or as hard as it is now to cancel a credit card." He assures us there are no stupid computers, only computers programed by stupid people.

Pierce and his wife live out in the New Jersey countryside and he comes into New York as infrequently as possible. "There's nothing wrong with that city," he is fond of saying, "that an atom bomb wouldn't cure—or maybe they can pave over all of Manhattan and make it into an airport—or maybe . . . ."

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power plants were more or less autonomous—but when the first something went wrong The Computer wouldn't be there to help them.

"We've been on the Big C for just over a hundred years," I said, more to myself than to Alice.

"What?"

"I was just wondering. Will we go back to the Stone Age, or what?"

"Don't be silly."

"I'm not." I looked at the chronometer and turned on the screen. A holofilm, fifty years old, by the look of it. "You brought the drinks?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Pour us each one, will you? Now."

She did and handed me a glass. I put it on the floor beside me, looked at the screen again. An unfamiliar station, we were over St. Louis. The lights looked nice from up here.

Strange, I thought. I do this for billions of people and for the whole of them (I tried not to think of the ones I was doing in), but I do it as much for the hundred and ten pounds of my Alice sitting here at my side as I do for all the rest. Even including grandpappy.

Now a flustered face on the screen.

"We interrupt our program," he said and swallowed.

The transmitters are still going, I thought. The newscaster didn't believe what he was trying to say.

"This is Howard Kalb, KLOC, Denver." I was surprised Denver was still on, so close to Colorado Springs. "There has been a tremendous explosion, probably nuclear, in Colorado Springs, within the last twenty minutes. All Computer functions have ceased. I repeat, all Computer functions have ceased. There is reason to believe that similar explosions have occurred in the Soviet Republic and in China." I'd even got that part of it right. "The public is urged not—"

I flicked it off, picked up my drink from the floor and looked into the eyes of my wife. We clinked glasses.

"To—whatever it is," I said.

"Yes." Alice's face was hard to read. She was weeping quietly, but I didn't know the context. One tear is much like another.

"The power will go," I said.

"When?"

"An hour, a week, who knows? I just thought I'd mention it. I don't want you to worry if all the lights go off down there." She looked down. "If all the power is gone by the time we get to Keene we'll fly around until dawn and go down on manual. No problem. I just didn't want you to worry," I said.

"All right."

The night was like a diamond, and the lights below were like stars. They stayed on almost all the way to Keene. ★

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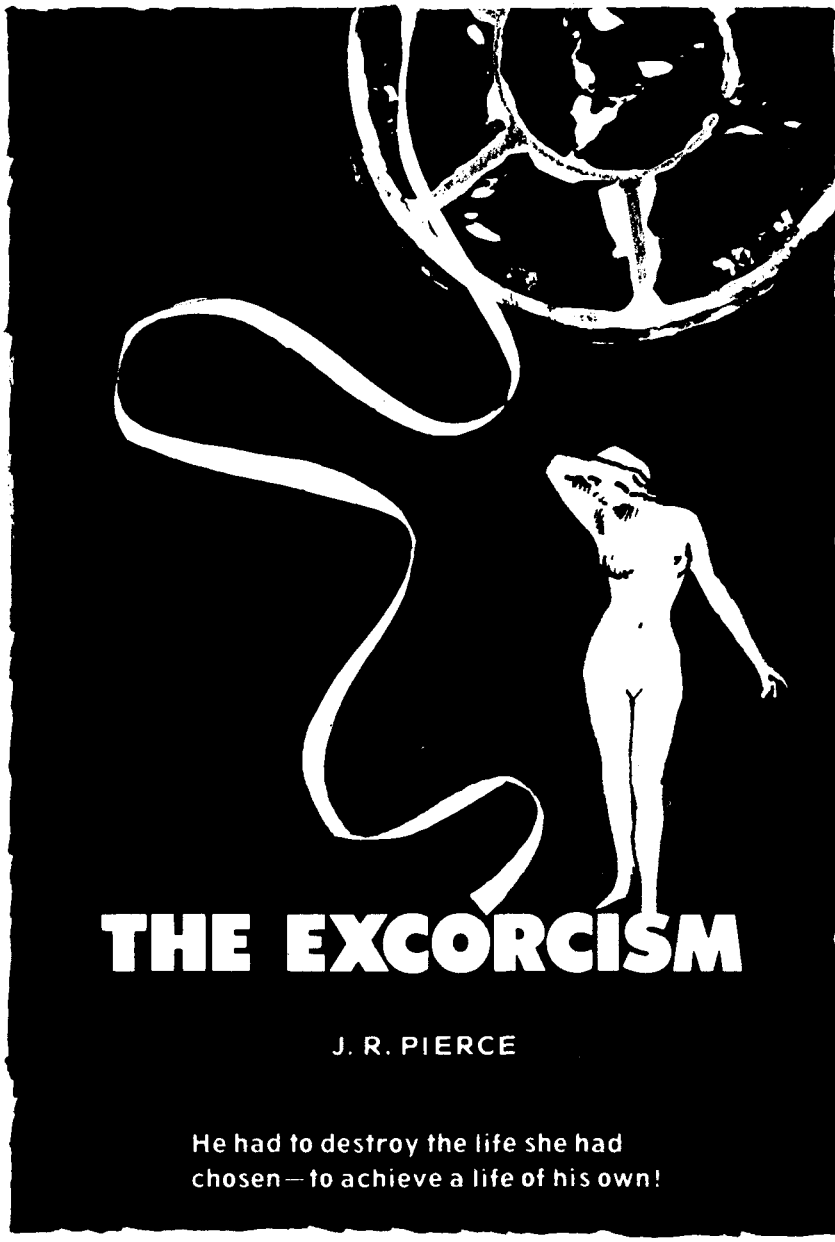

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IT WAS only when Harvey started to take Myra apart that the pain began to go away. Partly his purpose was to free himself of her hurt, but he was also fascinated. He marveled at the intricate interplay which gave her variety, at the smooth chaining and merging of seductive tricks and gestures—the careful posing of the classic profile; the graceful gesture of the perfect arm; the calculated display of the slender, high-arched foot; the gracefully careless bending over which, as if by chance, revealed the perfect breasts; the greater provocation of her body glimpsed through transparent gown; the deliberate lifting of the gown.

Myra's program—when he had solved it—was a marvel of subroutines, macroinstructions and geometrical interpolations, carefully keyed to his movements and reactions, to the monitoring of his bodily functions (he hadn't expected that) and to words and phrases he uttered and some simple relations between them. He hadn't realized how little what he had said had mattered in any immediate sense.

What had mattered was that he had chosen these particular programs. Or, rather, that he had chosen this particular simulation, taking her for a real woman. Through the filmy screen of his communication booth, he had seen her, chosen her, admired her, talked to her, touched her and lain with her. The Myra program—and the adaptive features that he had evoked from it—had been his darling, *his* Myra. Myra the beautiful, Myra the enticing, Myra the gentle, Myra the teasing, Myra the submissive.

He now knew that there were other Myras. There were, in fact, 5,346 subscribers to this time-sharing Myra processor. He speculated (so desirable was Myra). that there had to be hundreds or thousands of identical processors in the world, all giving a Myra to someone who wanted her and believed her to be real. Each subscriber found Myra a little different. Each subscriber's Myra changed as the user changed with mood and time.

Harvey had been shocked to find what some men required of Myra. He was gratified to find that there were limits to her compliance, that is, to the flexibility of her program. Those who went out of her scope, physically or intellectually, were artfully shifted to "friends" and became users of Sal, Ann, Jezebel or Hypatia or some other program. They congratulated themselves that they now had the sole love, affection, friendship, submission or services of the one woman in the world who was really suited to them. In a sense, they had.

As Harvey worked his way through Myra's flow charts and listings he saw what made her work.

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In his heart, in his recollections, Myra was not there. With his eyes closed, he could see *his* Myra looking artlessly at him. He could summon up a thousand glimpses of her body. He could feel it under his hands or against him. It must be like the recollection of a dear dead love, he thought. But Myra was not dead. He could have again what he had had before. If he keyed her number on the communicator she would be there. But it would not be the same. He had not called Myra since the night when he had divined what she was.

The initial numbing despair of that day passed, to be followed by mechanical apathy. He ate mechanically. Sleep did not come naturally; he lay quietly with idle thoughts until he induced sleep electronically. On three evenings he called his grave, fatherly, illusory friend, Donald, whom he had found to be a simulation. He watched the illusion of the room, the fire, the black cocker spaniel, Smoky. He could admire Donald abstractly as a work of art. He played chess with him, finding him, as always, an opponent difficult but not impossible to master. Harvey won about three out of five games. He supposed that this had been the comfortable edge he had needed.

Donald was a work of art and a fine one. Myra was no doubt a work of art. Harvey had not been able to look on her as one. He could not bring himself to call her —to use her—knowing what she was. To him, this was at once reasonable and unreasonable. He was intelligent enough to know that he had a problem. Problems called for solutions. In dissecting Myra's program he was probing toward a solution.

HARVEY thought of the day of frantic action following his discovery that Donald and Myra were simulations. He skipped breakfast that morning. He skipped the fresher. At the earliest reasonable hour he stepped into the transportation cubicle in his apartment and quickly emerged from the terminal in his anachronistic office, his office with a wooden desk and bookshelves with real books. He sat down before the very non-anachronistic console.

Why had he not used the console at home? He knew the answer. In his apartment he was a failure. He had chosen as a friend and as a mistress two illusions, not two real people. In his office he was still master, still successful. He had been successful in unraveling some threads of a past which had been almost totally tangled in an overwhelming bulk of computerized records. It was his discovery and understanding of early nonsense about "artificial intelligence" that had caused him to doubt Donald and Myra. His relation to others and to the world, might be a sham-

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bles, but his skills were sure and his intelligence keen.

Harvey hesitated before the console. He felt that he must speak to a human being—but to whom? In the years since he had established his office here in the library, sending machines burrowing for hidden books and records of the past, he had had no need to consult anyone else or to see anyone else. Machines had done what he had bidden them to do. But surely there must be some responsible person to whom he could talk.

He keyed ORGANIZATION CHART, wondering what would happen. In response the screen displayed a dictionary definition, followed by columns of detailed subheadings. Clearly he was on the wrong track.

I HAVE A COMPLAINT, he keyed. The screen displayed a list of eighty-seven books with that title, fifty-seven in the files and the others conjectured from passing references in man's literature.

Suddenly light dawned. Through long habit he was in the library's files, not on the public communication channels. He keyed the change and then wondered what to do next. It was useless to call the illusions of Donald or Myra. An old-fashioned word occurred to him and he keyed DIRECTORY. The screen responded with a huge, indented list of headings and subheadings. He scanned them with impatience. Nothing seemed right. Perhaps he should start at home.

He keyed LIBRARY and faced another long list. In this he finally located the library in which he was sitting. He keyed the number. A pretty, blank-faced girl stared out of the screen, obviously a simulation.

"I am the National Historical Library," the simulation said. "Please state your business."

"I want to talk to the librarian," he told her.

"There is no librarian," the simulation responded. "I am the National Historical Library. Please state your business."

"I want to talk to a human being. A human being in the library," he demanded.

"There is one human being in the library," the simulation said. "I will connect you."

A new image flashed on the screen. He found that he was staring at himself and broke the connection.

A sort of desperation seized Harvey, but his mind continued to function smoothly. He went back to the directory and studied it intently. Within a quarter of an hour he felt that he was on the track. Fifteen minutes later he had arrived.

His screen showed a man of indeterminate age, surely not old and certainly not young. The man had a squarish face of a healthy brown and bushy eyebrows but no

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hair. He sat, or lounged, behind an empty desk, a keyboard before him.

"I'm Harvey Adam, Eight-seven-two, seven-four-five-three," Harvey stated.

"Yes, so I see," the man replied, apparently looking at a part of the communication screen to the left of the image of Harvey. "A good programer, I see. Found books and microfiche in the library. Found a real track in the records. Might be interesting."

"But that isn't—" Harvey started to say.

"No," the man continued. "You broke out."

"Broke out?" Harvey asked.

"Found that the friends you had chosen were simulations. Can't put up with it. Want real people again."

That was it, Harvey thought. He wanted a real people again. In the years of his childhood and youth he had had to associate with the real people of his peer group. When he had been asked to father children, the mothers had been chosen for him. He had found people difficult and computers cooperative. People had adapted to his needs only partially and under persuasion or coercion. When, as an adult, he had chosen, he had unknowingly preferred computer simulations to real people. He had chosen the selfless, adaptable computer simulations, indistinguishable from life—and so much "better."

"Yes," Harvey said. "I want real people. But will they want me?"

"Depends," the man said. "You're good-looking. You're pretty smart. You ought to be able to beat out a computer. Look here—record this."

Harvey pushed the RECORD button. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's all identified," the man said. "But since you want to know, you're recording descriptions and access codes for all the simulations—for their programs, I mean. And name-numbers and access to files for all young male and female adults within a hundred miles—that is, for all those who haven't broken out. And observation numbers."

"What are those?" Harvey asked.

"Observation numbers will permit you to observe individuals while they work. And all the calls they make from their apartments," the man added. "That ought to be a help."

Harvey thought that it would.

"But my work?" Harvey asked.

"That's up to you," the man answered.

"Shall I report—" Harvey started.

"You're on your own now," the man said. "Everybody is, but some don't know it. Don't bother me; I'm busy."

"But," Harvey said, "are you a man or a simulation?"

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"Does it matter?" the man replied, reaching forward to key a button. He disappeared.

A WAVE of relief swept over Harvey as he digested what the man had said. He reached for the keyboard to examine the information he had been given. But no, he thought. He had had enough for the day. He entered his transportation booth and emerged at the Athletic Club. He had been too distraught to go there since he had found that Myra and Donald were simulations. He put on his sports suit and, going into the room marked SURFING, plugged in the cords and lowered the goggles.

Harvey found himself lying on a surfboard which floated on the clear, warm water off the north shore of Oahu, a huge roller rising behind him. He paddled frantically with his hands, then rose to his feet and slid forward at a dizzying pace. He turned the board away from the breaking crest and slid along half again as fast as the wave moved forward, keeping just ahead of the crest. He stayed ahead of the crest until the wave had almost spent itself. He enjoyed the buffeting of the foam. A phantom in an outgoing boat threw him a line and towed him out where he waited for another roller.

When Harvey tired of surfing he raised the goggles, pulled out the plugs and went to an adjacent booth, where he sailed quietly for an hour on the waters of the Aegean in a beamy, two-ended boat. The rock that made the isle of Hydra was bright in the sun to his right. Today he sailed alone, with no desire for competition. Only to experience the simulated sun, the simulated wind, the simulated slap of the waves. And the simulated sea. *The dragon green, the luminous, the dark, the serpent-haunted sea,* Harvey thought. *The snow-besprinkled wine of earth; the white and blue, flower-foaming sea.*

But as he rested he thought of Myra. The desperation was gone but the ache was not. Simulation that Myra was, she was real in his heart. Harvey unplugged from the Aegean and spent the rest of the day in simulated skiing in America, Austria and the Andes. Skiing left little time for thought. Exhausted at last, he went to his apartment late, ate, went to bed and induced sleep electronically.

THE next morning Harvey tackled his new information. He had reflected concerning his most immediate needs. As a start he sorted all the young adult females for what he thought might be common interests or compatibility. He came up with 2,742 and he didn't know how to narrow things down. He started looking at pictures, but his mind was preoccupied. Something seemed wrong. He wasn't

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looking for a book in the library. What *should* he do?

Finally he started in numerical order, an unseen watcher in offices, studios, laboratories, shops and hospitals. Sometimes he knew immediately that some particular scene was not for him and keyed the next number. Sometimes he paused for a minute—or five or ten. There was the way the young adult female looked. None was so beautiful as Myra, of course. And there was the way she moved. None was as graceful as Myra. There was the air of concentration, competence or don't care with which she did things. Sometimes, after ten minutes, he pressed the key that added the girl to the list on his home communicator.

It was surprising how fast time passed and how pleasantly. By five in the afternoon most of the girls had left for sports. He could not see them during simulated sports, so he set the computer to add the names of their sports to the list at home. Then he went skiing at simulated Alta.

Harvey enjoyed his sport. But dinner gave him time for thought. While he was eating he reflected on his approach and found it good. When he had finished he sat down at his communicator and started on the list.

The first girl, a brunette pathologist named Wanda, had not yet finished eating, so he passed on to the next.

Plain Jane was playing bridge with three simulations which she believed to be real young females. That told him little, so he went on to a demure artist named Sue.

Sue surprised him. She was talking to a hairy brute, more muscular than handsome. The brute conversed in monosyllables and these suggested some colloquialism belonging to another age. As a historian, Harvey was at a loss to place the dialect. ***But***, he reflected, ***he's just a simulation.*** The brute spoke that way because some people liked that sort of thing.

A moment soon came when the brute's pants dropped and Harvey found what young females like Sue really wanted. He had never measured life in quite those dimensions. ***I can't compete with that,*** Harvey thought and went on to Rita, a buxom brunette.

At first Harvey didn't know what to make of the scene that Rita's communicator showed, but presently the tangle on the rug resolved itself into two young females. One raised her head and addressed Rita.

"Hi," she said. "Come on in."

"I'll watch a while," Rita said. "There's plenty of time."

"Okay," said the other. "We're just getting warmed up."

Despite the fact that Rita could be nothing to him, Harvey watched for a while in fascination. Of course, as a historian he knew

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about these matters intellectually. It was different to watch them happening in what seemed to be the flesh. Harvey was rather excited by the time he recollected his purpose and moved on down the list.

By the end of the evening, he had found one distinct possibility. Maggie was a lively redhead. She liked to ski. That might be a bond, he reflected. Could two real people ski together in simulation? He might be able to program it. No one understood computers or simulation better than he did. It might be companionable to ski together. But the bother of skiing together on inferior real slopes would scarcely be worth while.

Maggie's lover, Ralph, was handsome. Harvey thought him no handsomer than himself. Ralph had about Harvey's build. But Ralph was listless and awkward. While he was agreeable enough, he didn't seem too bright. How could a girl like Maggie have chosen him? Harvey supposed that she had been looking for certain things and had found them in Ralph. Then she hadn't looked further. *She didn't find me*, Harvey thought. *But then, I am real and she was searching among simulations. Now, what can I do about Ralph?*

A few alterations in the program and Ralph's shallow agreeableness would become painful obtuseness. Harvey could even program Ralph to be out or busy on some occasions. This was no doubt unprecedented in simulations. Donald had always been at Harvey's call. And Myra—

THE loss of Myra as a person still hurt Harvey. Savagely he turned his attention toward Ralph. A touch of impotence should help to cool Maggie's feelings toward her simulated lover. And that should leave an opening for a real person: himself.

Harvey was not in a bad mood as he tried to sleep that night, but he was far from serene. His brain seethed with the technical details of what lay ahead. His body, aroused by an evening of evesdropping, seethed with sex. *Really, shouldn't I call Myra?* But that thought was too painful. He induced sleep electronically instead. Before he awoke Myra came to him in a dream, a shadow of a shadow, and temporarily relieved him of one preoccupation.

For the next week Harvey worked on Ralph. Despite his thorough knowledge of simulation, it took him several days to understand Ralph's program well enough to alter it and to make sure that the alterations would apply for Maggie alone. It would be cruel to spoil the fun of the other 2,740 subscribers whom this Ralph processor served.

As he gained confidence, Harvey made the alterations he had planned. Ralph became obtuse. A

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little step at a time, he became inconsiderate. More and more often he was out when Maggie called. For a few evenings Harvey observed the effect via Maggie's communicator. Satisfied that his programing worked, he stopped his observations. He found it disturbing and degrading to spy on another's sex life. Especially on the sex life of Maggie, whom he planned to have for himself.

Day by day Harvey thought out and made the planned alterations in Ralph's program and Ralph became progressively less and less accessible. Harvey skied a great deal after work, often two or three hours instead of one. On a few evenings he played chess with Donald, but he found this unsatisfactory. *It's strange,* he thought. *Donald behaves exactly as before. Then I enjoyed playing chess; now I don't. It's what goes on in my mind that makes the difference, I suppose.*

During a few evenings Harvey's thoughts turned to Myra and his plans for her. The effect was disturbing. To distract himself he planned his encounter with Maggie. There was a certain relish in that. But the actuality, of course, had to wait until the alterations he had made in Ralph had had effect. And until he was through with Myra.

So, when he had added the last touch, the debilitating touch, to Ralph's program, he started on Myra's. His touch was sure now, but he proceeded with loving care, subroutine by subroutine, macro by macro and, when necessary, instruction by instruction. How marvelous a thing Myra was, he thought as he took her apart. Cleverly chained together, keyed to inputs he himself had supplied, were the host of ingenious coquetries, the wealth of clever devices. These had been activated by a rough analysis of what he had said and by a variety of physiological inputs which his communicator —and those of other subscribers— had inputted to the Myra program.

No wonder Myra had responded accurately as well as artfully to his moods and words. When he had known Myra as a woman he had never known her so well. Then such knowledge might have spoiled things, Harvey realized. Now he wanted to know, despite all the fond sadness that knowing and recalling brought him.

At last his reprograming was complete. The plans for his encounter with Maggie were complete, too. But he must see Myra once more before putting them in effect.

ON THE evening of that day he sailed serenely on the beautiful Aegean, Hydra gleaming to his right. Satisfied and relaxed, he ate a leisurely meal. He enjoyed eating more than he had since his

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catastrophic realization that Donald and Myra, his carefully chosen friends, were not real people. Then, settling down comfortably before his communicator, Harvey keyed Myra's number.

There was a pang in Harvey's heart as he saw Myra again. She was seated in a familiar posture, looking at herself in the mirror of her dressing table. Her perfect features, relieved from severity by their slight rounding, were as breathtaking as ever. Her neck, arms and body had their accustomed grace. But for once the dressing table was not littered. Everything had been tidied in an unaccustomed, make-work sort of way.

And tonight Myra was not dressed in a guazy, revealing gown. Tonight she wore a beautiful brocade jacket and slacks of a soft but opaque material. These enhanced her beauty, but they did not reveal her body. And tonight Myra was frowning into the mirror with an expression that seemed to hold more determination than perplexity.

As she heard the signal Myra turned toward Harvey.

"I was going to call you, Harvey," she said.

Her expression was fond but firm. Harvey knew that it betokened something different in their relationship.

"I hope nothing's wrong, dear," Harvey said with serious concern.

Myra looked sad.

"It's more than something, Harvey. It's everything."

"But we've always had such fun," Harvey said eagerly.

"Fun. I suppose so, dear. But it doesn't get us anywhere," Myra replied softly but seriously. "It's no use."

"Why should it get us somewhere?" Harvey asked. "Isn't where we are good enough?"

"No, it isn't, Harvey. For children, maybe, but not for grown-up people."

The idea of the lovely Myra as a serious, grown-up person amused Harvey. *But*, he reflected, *all things can change.* He didn't know exactly what to say, but after a moment Myra continued.

"There's your work," she said. "I never have understood it."

"It's very complex," Harvey replied. "Sometimes it's exasperating. I come to you to get away from it."

"But you talk to Donald about your work," Myra objected.

That was a hit, Harvey thought.

"Loving isn't just—sex, Harvey," Myra went on. "Loving should be—sharing."

"What should I share with you that I don't, Myra?"

"That's just it, Harvey," Myra said stubbornly. "It's what you think of me that counts." She looked at him determinedly but her lips quivered and she seemed near tears. "I'm not going to see

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you any more, Harvey—and I mean it."

Harvey was full of a mixture of emotions which seemed quite detached from his understanding of the situation. Finally he spoke.

"If that's what you want, Myra," he assented, sadly and kindly.

"See?" Myra said, almost angrily.

"Isn't that what you wanted me to say?" Harvey asked.

Myra became a little calmer.

"I suppose it isn't, Harvey," she said. "I suppose I wanted you to say that none of what I've been saying is true. None of it."

There was another pause. Finally Myra spoke again. Now she seemed serene. The step had been taken. The pain had been felt. All of that was past.

"Don't regret anything, Harvey," Myra told him. "It *was* good. It was beautiful. But it's over now. And remember, I'll always think kindly of you, Harvey. You were good to me. You were good for me. But now we both need something else."

"You were good for me, Myra," Harvey said fondly. "And I'll always love you—"

"You'll love my memory," Myra told him. "And you should, dear. But you'll love somebody else."

Myra looked at him calmly, with a sort of secret joy and sadness showing through, he thought. Then she reached toward the key of her communicator and her image was gone.

The old Myra had been exorcised. The sweet cheat was gone. For Harvey a humiliating and exasperating experience had been replaced by a fond memory, sweetly with him as he dozed into peaceful sleep, thinking thoughts of the morrow and of Maggie.

And all that went as planned. Harvey had his morrow and his Maggie. Maggie took him on the rebound from the unpleasant experience he had engineered for her. But Maggie was only a beginning in Harvey's education in real people and the real world. For Maggie had chosen her Ralph well. She was a strong woman who liked weak men. ★

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Interface gave man instant access to friends—but made him instant prey to enemies!

DUNCAN LUNAN

LIAISON ASSIGNMENT

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I

EARTH had been a member of the interstellar Interface civilization for nearly six months. The people mainly responsible for this situation gathered one morning for coffee—with the RLV astronauts McKay, Slazeck and Devlin were Lang, Extraterrestrial Advisor to the U.N. Committee for Earth's Defense, and his assistant Cathy, Cathy Devlin-to-be. They sat in Lang's office at the Montana spacefield and McKay was holding forth on the subject of the committee.

"Ten years ago we were attacked from space. Massive, repeated attacks on the cities, chaos everywhere—you all know what happened. Acting military governments, some of them still acting. And as far as we knew then, when the raids stopped the respite was only temporary." He noted the range of expressions across the group. In those days Cathy had been a schoolgirl, horrified but untouched by civilization's nightmares. Devlin was a student taking flying lessons in his spare time, undecided, till then, about a military career. Slazeck, already a fighter pilot, had attacked a raiding ship, destroying two of its robot interceptors before he was shot down. McKay himself had been with NASA several years and had had no crack at the enemy. Lang, the only man to survive direct contact with the attackers, had lost wife, family, career and—worst of all—memory. His experiences in the hands of the aliens, the extraterrestrial advice that might really have been useful, had all been erased.

"So space research became a military endeavor," McKay went on. "The space program, when it started up again, was preparing for the next series of attacks. As it turned out, our objective was far too narrow. When the Interface contact arose and presented an altogether new situation, the committee failed to adjust to it. The Furtherance, the survey teams of the Interface, have been forced to work with us as individuals. Here we are, the Earth planetary agent and his group, with one gifted spaceship our only access to the Interface—and that's only a Recovery and Liaison Vehicle, a rescue ship. All Earth's cultural reps are gathered in this room right now, still advisers to a vast military organization we no longer need. Whoever the raiders were, we can call up help from the Interface if they reappear—but I think they made one assault here before the Furtherance opened up this part of the Galactic spiral, then moved on. They've gone back into the dark where they belong."

"So you feel ET affairs aren't for the military staff committee," said Lang. "Whose hat do we put on, then? UNESCO's?"

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"Might well be," said McKay. "Whoever the hat belonged to, under it should be an organization for trade and cultural links with the member races of the Interface—as many of them as possible—before any one of them can claim the Solar System for development. We know far too little about the Interface, yet we know enough to realize our problems aren't military ones."

"The argument's good," said Lang, "but the committee won't agree. For cultural interchange we first need ships—and all spacecraft design and manufacture are under military control."

"Don't I know it? They've opposed building a moonbase because they'd still have to use Saturns to supply it."

Slazeck was going to comment, but the phone rang beside him. "It's for you, Mac."

"A Furtherance ship has just come into orbit, sir," the control tower told McKay. "Mr. Kiliath is aboard and wishes to speak to you."

"Okay, I'll raise him from here." McKay took out his pocket communicator and plugged in to the perception circuits of the RLV, out across the field. "Acknowledge."

Without leaving the office, he was "in orbit" far above the Earth, in the security of the massive Furtherance starship. The others, with badge relays, could only hear what went on. "Greetings, friend McKay," said the computer-translation voice. "We do not seek rescue, so I thought to save you a direct contact."

"I appreciate that," said McKay. The communications relay embedded in his skull had a kick like a mule. "What can we do for you?"

"I would be grateful for your assistance," the computer-translation began, "on a new member planet of the Interface, named Sarran—"

THE RLV came out of Interface at twenty thousand feet and at once McKay began to read meaning into the neutral words of the translation. The planet was indeed very old: from this altitude no life showed, only an endless vista of bare, eroded hills. As if the Interface, a half-mile disc linking Earth's sky to Serann's, had opened instead on a far reach of time.

Almost at once McKay was uneasy. Already the assignment had diverged from expectation: when Kiliath had spoken of an old planet, freshly reached by the Furtherance teams, he had not conveyed the impression of this bleakness. No doubt there were more surprises to come.

This was to be a cultural mission—Sarran was inhabited by a race named the Jarra, the remnants, said Kiliath, of a once-

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great civilization. The mission was to assess how the Jarra might be assimilated into the Interface, if they wished to be. At last a liaison assignment for McKay's Recovery and Liaison Vehicle, something to reinforce the point he had been making to Lang. Now, looking at the hostile landscape of Sarran, he wondered if the demonstration would backfire. All his misgivings about his having brought Cathy along also returned. He did not doubt her competence, he had explained—when the Furtherance teams had reached Earth she had been their first contact. But the RLV's two interstellar missions to date had turned thoroughly hairy and he had no wish for a girl's company on another

"That great Furtherance dreadnought will be there to protect me," she had replied.

Cathy was determined to share the new ET contact, especially after Kiliath described them. "What are the Jarra?" McKay had asked and the computer translation had replied, "Birdpeople."

"This I must see," she had enthused after Kiliath's ship had gone. "What can they be—slender, with fragile wings, or soaring feathered monarchs?"

"That computer can be thoroughly misleading," McKay pointed out. "Kiliath may only have said they *keep* birds."

"Oh, wonderful! Hunting with great hawks, as big as eagles?"

McKay was afraid she would be disappointed. Now as he flew over Sarann, only minutes after their takeoff from the Montana field, he wondered if disappointment could be the right word. The intelligence that could survive here while the planet aged should be met with caution, if not apprehension.

The RLV's search devices pinpointed Kiliath's touchdown almost at once. McKay lost altitude till they were circling it: an old castle on top of a crag, weathered so that it merged into the rock. Beside it on the flat top of the crag was McKay's second shock: not the huge Furtherance ship which had paused in Earth orbit, but a stub-winged shuttle that must have been carried aboard. Though he had smiled at the idea of a warship to protect Cathy, he himself felt suddenly committed much farther out in the unknown.

He brought the RLV down on VTOL thrust, folding back the variable wings into delta configuration as the landing blocks went down. He expected clouds of dust, but the winds had swept this spot clean. The jets stopped and the ship settled on its pads.

TWO by two they went through the airlock. Kiliath had assured them no precautions need be taken about bacteria; and Kiliath himself was coming from the castle to greet them. The humanoid Fallaran, Kil-

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iath's race, came from a high-gravity planet: about four feet tall, massively built, they had thick gray skin and brilliant eyes. To date Kiliath had been the individual best known to the RLV team.

"I see now why you asked for the RLV," said McKay as they were strolling towards the entry. "But where is your own ship?"

"The ship which I second-commanded was lost near your Moon," Kiliath reminded him. "On the ship which brought us here I was a passenger only."

"But surely a Furtherance mission of this importance rates a starship?"

"No need exists now for great fleets in this sector," Kiliath replied. "Almost all are gone to other duties."

"I see," said McKay, but his tone of voice would be lost in translation. Kiliath's words explained why no starships had been available on the RLV's last rescue mission; they altered the whole perspective of McKay's own partial membership in the Furtherance. The revelation needed a great deal of thought—and at that moment when he was least prepared, McKay came face to face with the first of the Jarra.

It wasn't, he thought wildly after his heart started beating again, that the Jarra reminded him of anything frightful from Earth's cultural background. A succession of possibilities like ghost, vampire, demon had flashed across his mind and been discarded. The Jarra was tall, nearly seven feet tall, and dressed in black: a thin garment held by what seemed to be great shell-cases hinged at the collar-bone. The shoulders flexed briefly, lifting impossibly high for human bones; McKay realized that the Jarra's skeleton had two stable configurations, one for standing upright and the other for horizontal flight. The skin was deathly white, as were the curls of hair above the tall forehead—and the face was a nightmare. If you stretched a nylon stocking over a human head and made a carving of the result, McKay thought, you might reach an approximation.

He hoped the Jarra couldn't read the shock on his face. What effect the alien had on the others, he hadn't noticed; McKay was still in a daze as the party moved through stone corridors to the castle hall. He must be getting too old for this game, he thought bitterly. Every time his eye fell on one of the Jarra during the meal that was served to them, the same pang of revulsion shot through him.

They were proud and independent—and suspicious of the strangers—he realized as Kiliath negotiated with them. They had survived a history far longer than Earth's and knew their capabilities. These were the aristocracy—from castles far across the land—what could you call them,

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lords, dukes, chieftains? All of these and none of them, for every title had unwanted terrestrial associations. Each Jarra chief his castle and his own people in it. This was Castle Carraine. Two miles down the valley, on the other side, was Bira, its close ally—and what, if anything, would the Interface do for them? They had no ships, little technology—their problem was Earth's, McKay realized, on a greater scale.

At least, he thought, when he and his crew returned to the ship at nightfall, his hosts didn't have a Committee for Sarann Defense to obscure issues.

NEXT morning McKay split his gang, set them about the tasks of the mission. Slazeck and Devlin went out with the Furtherance team to assess the remaining resources of the ancient planet; Lang and McKay took the RLV up into space, to take an Interface relay out to Sarann's large moon. Cathy stayed behind to begin her study of the Jarra race and its history. If she was frightened of the aloof birdmen she gave no sign: she might have been starting a social survey in the ordinary small American town. So far, McKay had to admit, the girl was shaping up better than he was.

The moon was a hundred thousand miles out, well beyond the ten-thousand-mile range of the standard Interface satellite, so a rocket flight was needed to place a relay in orbit round it. Still they could use the first relay to save time and fuel. Climbing away from the castle, McKay said, "Up Interface—" to the computer-autopilot and a black circle opened in the sky ahead of them. When the RLV came out on the other side it was already ten thousand miles out and on trajectory for the moon at four miles a second above escape velocity. Deceleration into lunar orbit would involve a velocity change of about five miles a second out of the twelve mps the RLV could achieve from full tanks and the return trip—once the relay had been placed—would use up no fuel at all.

How long had it been since this trip had last been made—if ever it had been? The mission still had to establish whether the Jarra had ever had space travel even to the extent of reaching their moon.

Lang, McKay found, shared his reaction to the Jarra, though apparently to a lesser extent. The man must have worse terrors locked within his own mind, after all. But McKay had been playing down his own feelings—he was downright glad to be off the planet again and ashamed of it.

II

CONVERSATION with the Jarra was a little difficult that morning. With the RLV out in

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space, Cathy was using the shuttle's computer for translation; and frequently in the course of Devlin's mineral survey the mountains got between them. When the Interface satellite was overhead there was no break in communication but at other times she found the translation voice would fade away without warning, leaving the Jarra mouthing his own harsh syllables into the microphone. Heraxt, the Furtherance officer Kiliath had left with her, could only wave his hands and murmur apologies equally incomprehensible. She renewed her private resolution to learn the language as soon as possible, but right now the Jarra were losing patience with her. The lords had flown off to their own castles and it began to seem that she too might be asked to leave. Not wishing to give up, Cathy suspended her efforts in order to argue with Devlin, but all she got from him was that nothing could be done.

She was composing a few subtle remarks for Devlin's return when the faint sound of rocket motors reached down through the corridors of the castle.

"I didn't expect the RLV so soon," she said, looking at her watch as she got up—and to her surprise, Heraxt did not understand.

When she emerged from the castle on to the crag, she saw why. The descending rocket was *not* the RLV, nor, she guessed from Heraxt's reaction, anything from the Furtherance fleet. Shock-absorbing legs were opening around the brilliant flame as it came vertically down: the noise forced the watchers back behind the muffling walls of stone.

The creatures that emerged were humanoid, though their golden spacesuits hid details. They came across the landing area with great assurance and the Jarra passed Cathy and Heraxt in the entry and went out to meet them. It was obvious that they had met before. A few words were exchanged; then the group came back in silence and Cathy and Heraxt followed them, baffled and ignored, into the castle and between the tapestries of the ancient corridors.

As they came once again to the conference hall of Carraine, Heraxt obviously made up his mind about the situation. Taking Cathy's arm, he drew her quietly aside; though she resisted, she could do nothing against his high-gravity strength. Without hurrying, he drew her steadily down the access hall. Cathy's protests went uncomprehended, but she knew this was wrong. Something terrible was going to happen—and suddenly she knew what it was. Glimpses of the future were rare for her, though second-sight supposedly ran in her family, but she saw clearly what was going to hap-

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pen. A show of force attempted, a weapon produced, cries of rage from the Jarra—the lord of Carraine would rise from his place, black wings opening to balance him as his skeleton adjusted for flight, arms thrust forward—with one backward sweep of his wings, rise from the floor and strike with white, clawlike hands at the golden-suited enemy.

"We mustn't leave them together—" she cried—and a moment later from down the hall came a shriek of avian fury.

Heraxt stopped dead. Cathy wrenched her arm free and turned back, slowing, however, as she realized what she would rush into without means to make herself understood.

The alien lay sprawled on the floor, a great gash torn in the golden spacesuit below the helmet, the gun lying far across the hall. The Jarra lord hovered over him, under the stone arches of the roof, slow strokes of his wings keeping him airborne. He was staring down, his face shadowed by the raised shell-cases on his back. The white hands hung vertically, splashed with blood. We must remain neutral, thought Cathy, *we must calm this down*. She walked deliberately forward, amazed and appalled by her own nerve, and kneeled under those terrible claws to examine the body. Body it definitely was, now she could see into that dreadful wound.

How do I cope with this? she thought frantically, pausing for a moment before straightening up. *Persuade him first to come down . . .*

Suddenly she was desperate to get out from under those claws. If the Jarra should swoop at her, her U.N. blouse would be no protection at all, much less than the spacesuit Carraine had torn so easily. And in another moment of insight and horror, she realized how it was going to happen. Before she could react the missing aliens appeared in the doorway, guns already raised. Fire crackled across the hall and down came the Jarra, clawing blindly at the air as it fell.

THE Interface relay was almost spherical, though the shape was made up of complex components fitting one into another. McKay suspected it was like that all the way through, a jigsaw of solid-state components. Thrust out from the cargo hatch, it floated around the moon with the RLV as McKay completed the activation routine.

"Dev's calling you from Sarann," Lang reported.

McKay shifted his attention and the computer display altered accordingly.

"Acknowledge."

"Devlin to RLV, Devlin to RLV, report your position please."

"We're orbiting the moon, get-

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ting ready to come back. What's the problem?"

"You're up there and I'm in the shuttle. What's taking off from Carraine?"

"Get back there and find out—we're on our way." McKay had been spinning out the activation of the relay, with the excuse that he wanted to learn more about its systems. All he had to do was say, "Activate—" and it was ready for use. He selected exit code for the Sarann relay, specifying position and airspeed required, and ordered, "Up Interface—" A circle of pale blue sky half a mile across opened in vacuum in front of the ship and he fired the vernier motors to push the ship through it.

They glided out over the worn landscape and McKay opened the intakes and started up the ramjets. A rising cloud of smoke and dust marked Carraine's valley; McKay made two turns to put the ship on the same approach as the Furtherance shuttle streaking over the crags.

McKay overtook the shuttle as it made a low pass over the site of Carraine. He was fairly sure it was the site of Carraine, but he checked with the ship's memory of the landscape to make sure. For the castle itself was gone: it and the crag it stood on had been turned to slag by the nuclear boost of the departing ship—a great wound of molten rock, still draining sluggishly into the valley.

"The ship's our first puzzle," said McKay after they landed at Bira. Anything to keep Devlin's thoughts from Cathy. "You don't think it left the planet?"

"Not on that trajectory," Devlin replied, raging. "They didn't need a nuclear takeoff even for that flimsy reason. Either that was deliberate murder, Mac, or they were covering up something worse they'd done—"

"Easy. They're still on Sarann somewhere. If that damned satellite had been overhead we could have tracked them." Though the satellite could generate an Interface linking one side of the planet to the other, to use it you had to have line-of-sight radio contact. "Who are they, then? Where are they from?"

"They have been here for many months," the lord of Bira put in. "Beyond these mountains they have built a structure, on which we keep watch. At first we helped and supplied them, but their demands grew. We waited to see whether you were like them or would league with them."

Everyone wanted to speak, but McKay silenced them with a peremptory wave. He stood and faced the Jarra.

"They have killed our people as well as yours."

"We will destroy them," said the Jarra. "You may league with us."

The assurance of it, thought McKay. They, the birdlords, with

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only their brains and physical strength, would accept the aid of interstellar civilization to fight off the strangers. And then he thought, *Perhaps their race is older than interstellar civilization.* As he faced the Jarra his subconscious still screamed *Monster* . . . But intellect told him that these were allies he could trust.

"What are they?"

"In shape much like yourselves. But they wear metallic suits at all times and do not walk in the air of our world. Not so very different from us when we walk the ground, but wingless."

"They do not use Interface as we do?"

Kiliath seemed to be seeking reassurance rather than information. McKay didn't listen, because the satellite should now be above the horizon. He said nothing, not to arouse false hopes even for a moment, but plugged in, scanning the planet for Cathy's medallion communicator via the RLV's banks.

The signal was there. "Interrogate," he said quietly.

The others were looking at him. "Mac—"

"She's alive," said McKay. The atmosphere lightened at once. "Alive but unconscious. Plug in to this, all of you."

THEY all had full communicators and the RLV circuits could get a picture from Cathy's medallion. Since she was lying unconscious, apparently at floor level, not much could be seen—but two of the aliens were standing near her.

"They are called the . . . " said Bira. The name was in the wrong language and the computer translation left it out.

"Just give us the sound," said McKay.

"They call themselves the AL Tanrai. In your language—"

"—the Cosmic Jackals," said Lang, speaking suddenly as if hypnotized.

McKay cut the perception circuit with a jerk. Lang was still staring into space—whether still plugged in or for some deeper reason could not at once be told.

"What do you—"

"Don't interrupt," said Lang, obviously under great strain, "or I'll lose it again—"

"Record," said McKay to his own communicator and held it forward.

"The Al Tanrai were part of the attack on Earth." Lang was almost whispering. "They came in the later stages, when the ground was already broken. They prefer to do that, to dog greater powers through the Galaxy. Their ships are faster than light. They are a group mind: if they were all to gather together only one intelligence would be present, a single consciousness. That was how it was at their beginning."

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A total silence had possessed the group. Even the Jarra seemed fascinated. "They are creatures of a giant world," Lang went on. "Methane and ammonia, great cold, great pressure. . . They had an Earth-type companion planet, where the inhabitants perfected space travel and went down to them. . ." Lang paused again. "Don't think of the humanoid forms as people or even as slaves. They lost everything long, long ago. They're only extensions of the Al Tanrai mind: if you destroy the element controlling them, the humanoids are mindless. . ." Lang seemed to lose his thread.

"They are vulnerable?" prompted McKay.

"Yes. They travel in groups and if you knock out one unit when they're in rapport—you can be lucky and paralyze the rest. Their pressurized tanks are the Achilles' heel—they decompress and burn in air if you rupture them," Lang finished in a great rush.

"Anything more?" asked McKay after another long pause.

"No, that's all I know about them. . . I keep losing track even of that. . ."

"Let it go," said McKay. "It's all recorded—you needn't hold it in mind."

Lang relaxed and gradually came back to normalcy. "Did I tell you anything important?" he asked.

"You gave us the lowdown on them from start to finish," said Devlin. He was still intensely angry.

"Thank God for that," said Lang, relaxing still further. "It had to be important, whatever it was."

"Someone did a great job on your memory," McKay remarked wonderingly. "As if all knowledge of the attacks had to be concealed. . . A lot of alien ships were destroyed then. I wonder if any of the Al Tanrai escaped from Earth?"

"None," said Lang with great abruptness.

"You remember some more?"

"What are they doing with Cathy?" Devlin exploded, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"They took a girl last time," Lang said, rushing again. "When they landed in San Francisco and I drove them off, they were taking a girl back to the ship. They used explosives to force people out of the ruins."

"What for?"

"I stopped them," said Lang. "We never found out."

"Let's not be too patient now," Slazeck put in. "We know their weaknesses, we have an advantage. Let's move!"

The clock had gone back ten years, thought McKay. Back to the time of the attacks. Everyone had scores to settle.

Aloud he said, "If we make a

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straight attack we'll lose Cathy for sure. Bira, didn't you say the place was watched?"

"Watched and surrounded," Bira affirmed.

"You have men placed for battle?"

"To the north and to the east."

"Great," McKay said. "Can we get past their defenses?"

Kiliath broke the ensuing pause. "Time may be very short. Let us take the shuttle and go with Bira to raise up his powers. Friend McKay, be ready to bring the RLV through Interface if we call for it. Fate may give us an opportunity—perhaps only a brief one—and we must be ready to seize it."

The meeting broke up but McKay made sure he caught Kiliath alone. "Why this urgency? You are holding something back from us."

"I hold nothing back," said Kiliath's translation. "I press for action for Cathy's sake. We must miss no chance for her rescue—it grieves me that you are less considerate."

"Less considerate? Devlin's nearly out of his mind and I—"

"The translation misleads you," said Kiliath. The machine was failing to express some emotion, certainly, McKay could tell. "I thought of Heraxt, whom the satellite cannot locate. He and his communicator are one with the slag of Carraine."

III

SLAZECK and McKay waited at the RLV controls, in the armor they would almost certainly need for the rescue. *What a cultural showing we're making,* McKay thought. Heraxt may have died protecting Cathy, and we never gave him a thought. It's lucky we do have an outside enemy on to whom we can project our inadequacies and dissatisfactions.

The rescue "plan" was packed with both: basically, it was that the Jarra should draw the fire of the Jackal base; the RLV would make a surprise strike out of Interface to knock out the defenses and the shuttle would dive in to make the rescue. If the AL Tanrai were the professionals Lang described, McKay thought, they were inviting a massacre.

"The only point for our side," he said, "is that the Al Tanrai may not realize this ship can fight. It's a leftover from previous Furtherance troubles and its weapons are obsolete by their standards—I suppose they'd never let us use it otherwise—but it is built to make rescues in combat, which makes it a damn sight more use than that damn shuttle."

"I certainly thought Kiliath meant us to do liaison work for the big starships when he asked us along," Slazeck said.

"I never would have—what the hell?" His communications relay

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had just punched him in the back of the head.

"We are the Al Tanrai," said the translation voice of the ship. "We have detected the intrusion of your Interface into a region of space we have roamed for a thousand years. You will not find us obliging hosts."

"Mac, this is impossible," said Slazeck.

"It's not impossible," McKay snapped. "They've bugged our satellite. No wonder their base didn't show on Kiliath's surveys."

"Your species is new to us, so we took the female for examination. Our preliminary inquiries being completed, you may recover this unit if you require it. Do not use your Interface within ten miles of our base or you will be destroyed. We are the Al Tanrai: our statement ends."

The pilots exchanged glances. "Well?"

"It's the chance Kiliath was hoping for. We can get in among them before the shooting starts."

"Alternatively, they've detected the Jarra and the shuttle closing in on them and they want to eliminate the RLV, as the unknown factor in the situation."

"They may get a surprise," commented McKay, his anger renewed. "Rescue ship or not, this baby has teeth!"

The RLV was already airborne, rising on VTOL thrust, turning out over the valley. McKay converted smoothly to jet and then ramjet propulsion, climbing toward Interface altitude.

"It has powerful eyes as well," said Slazeck. "They may not realize we can pinpoint Cathy's location in their base."

"They'll probably guess that. The shuttle has some pretty advanced sensors and I suspect the Al Tanrai have that ship pretty well sized up. On that basis they won't be expecting weapons or rescue systems—or rocket maneuvers!"

"I don't get you, Mac. The shuttle has rocket motors, fusion-powered like ours."

"It doesn't have independent aerospace capability," McKay replied, banking away from his original course. "It can work in space if Interface puts it there, but its total velocity change is two miles a second or less. Even if the Al Tanrai know we went to the moon they probably think our fuel's all gone."

"I don't see the good of that," Slazeck protested.

"You will," promised McKay. At least he had a plan to work on. "Take over and keep heading away from them meantime—we need as long a run for this as we can get."

SOME minutes later the ship turned back to its original course. Now fully suited and sealed into his acceleration shield, McKay looked on as Slazeck

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pulled up the nose, closed the air intakes and fired the fusion motor. The RLV went up on a column of blue flame, matching the sub-orbital trajectory of the Al Tanrai ship. The projected point of impact moved over the horizon, across the mountains into the vicinity of the alien base.

"That does it," said McKay. He had separated the capsule from the ship's life-support system. "Here I go."

"Good luck, Mac." The perception circuits blanked out as McKay ejected from the ship.

He plugged in again at once, to watch as Slazeck turned the coasting ship over and fired the brilliant motor again. As fast as it had come up the RLV decelerated, curving the high peak of its trajectory back down into the atmosphere. The capsule rode on alone.

It had been vital to complete the rocket maneuvers before they broke the horizon of the alien base. The ship itself could be made invisible to radar, but the fusion exhaust would be hard to hide. As for the capsule, its designers had foreseen the possibility that the escaping astronaut might not want to be conspicuous. With its Mayday systems turned off, the capsule was well-nigh undetectable.

McKay extended the tiny periscope and watched the wrinkled face of Sarann turning past. The acceleration shield/escape capsule/stretcher unit had always seemed to him to be the best part of the RLV's design. He would be using the system to the utmost this time—always supposing the Al Tanrai didn't spot him coming down.

He wasn't moving fast enough, he hoped, for a flare of ionization to give him away. In due course the instruments told him he could put out the periscope again—and there was the Al Tanrai base, three linked spheres with a cluster of supporting installations, sitting in the desert just beyond the hills. About ten miles from it, he should be a barely visible speck dropping down the sky. It was midday now and there was plenty of glare.

The rising hills hid him from the base. He flipped the capsule over into lifting body altitude, slowing up dramatically, and came down on a hillside, starting the fans to cushion the impact. Though the re-entry hadn't been fiery, heat was now beginning to soak through from the heat-shield—once out of the capsule, McKay pulled a toggle that blew the shield clear.

Apart from the cragtops of Carraine and Bira this was his first time on Sarran soil. It wasn't as barren as it looked from the air—he saw clumps of thorny plants all around him on the hillside. McKay didn't pause, but broke open more of the shielding and fetched out the two guns he had carried with him from the

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ship. Pull-out sections in the nose of the capsule, now the heatshield was gone, made slits for the guns when they were mounted beside the couch. With sights, trigger and windshield set up the unit became a flying sled, using the remaining shielding for armor. McKay started up the fans again and made for the alien base, hugging the hillsides.

The Al Tanrai obviously thought they had a future on Sarran. Though their base sat on the firm sand, not in it, setting it down must have been a major undertaking. The three big spheres, with their supporting girders and piping, made the place look vaguely like an oil refinery. The surrounding huts and tents for the humanoid extensions of the Al Tanrai mind were of lighter construction. McKay noticed launch trolleys to bring the rockets to the spheres: the ship which had snatched Cathy was still in a gantry at the end of the row. He could see how the Al Tanrai had become nomads in space—in general, installations like this would be easier to manage in free-fall.

TWENTY miles away the RLV came out of Interface. McKay couldn't see it, but his implanted relay told him it was there. The ship was broadcasting its presence, supposedly to the Al Tanrai, but alerting McKay, Devlin and Kiliath without giving them away. McKay slid back down the slope, settled on the sled and plugged in. Opposing FTL ships with this cockleshell was like pitting a crossbow against a machinegun, he thought; you had to make sure you got the guy with your first shot.

Ten miles out, on final approach, Slazeck flicked on the RLV search devices to locate Cathy. This was the biggest risk in their plan: that the Al Tanrai would have put her where her medallion was screened from interrogation. But they hadn't: she was still where they'd seen her last. It was an airlock in the upper part of one of the spheres, on the far side from McKay. She was still unconscious, still guarded, but the lock door was open. McKay raced the sled over the hilltop. As Slazeck continued his drawn-out, conspicuous approach, McKay made his dash across from the hills. That half-minute of racing high over the desert was the longest of his life.

Since he was attacking an upper level, the spheres themselves gave him cover. He curved over a connecting tunnel, rounded the sphere to the airlock, guns blazing as he came down on the platform by the outer door. Probably the guards never saw him at all. Another surge of lift from the protesting fans and he was inside the lock.

McKay was off the sled in a second, lifting out one of the guns.

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The Al Tanrai must know he was here, if only because their "eyes"—the guards here—had been taken out. Their attention would switch to the lock, away from the incoming ship—but to reach him, their minions would have to come through that outer door with the sunlight behind them. He could hold the lock long enough to negotiate.

Covering the entrance, McKay bent down to Cathy. She was lying face down, not bound or restrained in any way, just neatly laid on the metal floor. What had they been doing to her? He found only one injury, an ugly senseless wound across her back like a triple clawmark raked through clothing and skin. To what question did that supply an answer, in God's name?

The RLV was approaching touchdown. Slazeck had converted to STOL thrust, put down flaps and gear and with them had extended the ship's two cannons, above and below the fuselage, trained on the spheres. McKay was about to tell him to hold his fire when he saw that the lock doorway was less than half its former height.

He had assumed the outer door was retracted into the wall—instead, the airlock floor was rising toward the curved segment of the sphere overhead. McKay had noticed that the floor area was less than half the section through the sphere; even so, the volume of air to be flushed out seemed excessive. Now he realized, as the remaining half-circle of sunlight became a shrinking segment, that the pressure below was raising the floor to plug the entrance and expel air from vents in the top of the dome. The sliver of sunlight vanished and his contact with the ship was simultaneously cut off.

Any second now, thought McKay, *we're in for a methane-ammonia quick-freeze.* He bundled Cathy into the sled and slammed down the shielding before sealing his own faceplate and going on to the suit's air supply. Suit and stretcher could both cope with the low temperature, but not with the pressure change he anticipated.

Outside, Slazeck had evidently discovered McKay was in trouble. He boosted the vertical component of the thrust, arresting the touchdown, and the RLV sailed down the row of spheres, pumping armor-piercing shells into the underside of each. Freezing vapor sprayed out behind it.

McKay heard the shells penetrate and explode. A series of massive shocks through the sphere knocked him from his feet and bounced him in his armor on the metal floor. Slazeck was banking away from the weakened domes. In ragged sequence hatches blew out under each, dropping to the ground as ramps—used in the con-

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struction of the base, presumably. Down each, now, the Al Tanrai living environment erupted in explosive decompression, boiling instantly as it hit the desert air. Icy mist enveloped all the area around the spheres and, under it, fires were starting.

THE airlock floor was dropping again as the pressure beneath it went down. Obviously the effect of the shells had been catastrophic; McKay doubted the Al Tanrai could have survived as an immediate danger. He was more worried now that the spheres might blow up before he and Cathy got clear—all kinds of systems must have been thrown into chaos. Sunlight stabbed across the floor again as the top of the outer door came into view.

Standing in the doorway, as the airlock floor came to rest, was one of the golden-suited humanoids. It started forward immediately, gun swinging, following the group-mind's last volition; but once inside, its brain was empty. The gun continued to swing in futile arcs. Lest it should fire, McKay shot the creature down as one might end a wasp's struggles with insecticide. Outside he found a party of them, crawling aimlessly on the ladder and scaffolding leading to the platform. Beyond doubt, the Al Tanrai were dead.

Already the sun and breeze between them were disposing of the fog below. He led the stretcher unit down the scaffolding, avoiding the big ramps with their burning organic debris, and struck out across the sand to what should be a safe distance. Slazeck was bringing back the ship, jets filling but not defeating the great silence which had fallen over the enemy outpost.

He raised the stretcher on its fans to the recovery hatch, and Slazeck took it aboard. The main airlock was open, like a big airbrake in the white underside of the ship; McKay stepped on the door and it lifted him.

"What's taking so long in there?" Slazeck asked.

"Suit decontamination," McKay answered. "Sarran's clear for us, but who knows what Al Tanrai bugs we're carrying." The medic tapes would deal with anything alien Cathy had picked up.

McKay took his time. He had no regrets about the Al Tanrai, but Cathy's injury upset him. Not only had he, as mission commander, let it happen, but he had had to rescue her, Devlin being out of reach. This was the second time that had happened, and he worried about the effect on their relationship.

"Here comes the shuttle," Slazeck reported.

"Okay, I'll go back out."

They were getting out of the shuttle on the far side, looking to-

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wards the spheres: Lang, Devlin, the Fallaran, Bira.

"I think Cathy's all right," McKay told them when they reached the ship. "Her back's injured, but it's only a flesh wound. Medic tape's not come up with anything else."

"It will be best to return her to familiar surroundings," said Kiliath. "I have declared this an emergency situation, so Furtherance warships will be here in a few hours at most. If I must ask for more help, friend McKay, I will send a message sphere to Earth."

"Are you sure we should leave? There may be other Al Tanrai units in this planetary system."

"Quite possibly," said Lang. "They usually check out the gas giant planets, I think. But if they were in rapport with this element they, too, will have 'died' like these humanoids."

"The lunar relay, which is free of interference, will warn us if they approach," said Kiliath. "And the weapons of the planetary relay will hold them off until units of our fleet arrive. Take Cathy to Earth to recover."

An explosion reverberated inside the Al Tanrai spheres. Black smoke began to pour from an open airlock.

"All right, let's go," said Mckay.

WAITING to go through the lock, he looked back at the non-human group. The Jarra features gave him the same shock: alien, however familiar. The Fallaran and Jarra were still in conference by the shuttle when McKay took off. He flew around the end of the base on VTOL thrust, converted and pulled away over the desert, waves of sound echoing on the hills below.

"The satellite's not yet here," he announced as the RLV went on up, "but it will be by the time we're high enough." Five thousand feet was as near to the ground as he cared to use Interface.

Scanning the expanding view, the RLV sensors detected a flicker of movement. McKay directed his attention to it and it grew into a black flight of Jarra, already well past the sphere-base and flying on to some unknown destination. What lay further down the mountain chain McKay had no idea, but he was sure the Jarra knew where they were going. He let the steadfast group fade back into the barren landscape.

The head-up display drew a pattern of lines intersecting the horizon, crossing and pinpointing the rising satellite. McKay had already set exit code for Earth.

"Up Interface—"

For their own field they now had an Interface corridor, a strip of sky avoided by other aircraft. They came out into sunset over Montana, contacted the tower and began a routine letdown.

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An ambulance was waiting by the hangar when McKay taxied in. "She doesn't need to go to a hospital," he said. "We'll take her home and be sure one of us is around when she wakes up."

"Okay," said Lang. "Walt and I will come over later."

Devlin and McKay rode in the ambulance. As they left the spacefield McKay became aware of a curious pattern in the glass beside him. He rubbed at the window, but the deposit wouldn't come off.

At Cathy's address the ambulance driver and nurse lifted Cathy's stretcher in and transferred her into bed. She still wore the slightly troubled expression McKay had noticed when he first reached her, but was sleeping peacefully.

"She'll be all right," he said.

"If I'm going to stay here tonight I'll need a few things," said Devlin. "Mac, will you make yourself at home? I'll be back directly."

"I'll drop you on my way to the field," said the ambulance driver.

Taking Devlin at his word, McKay made for the kitchen. He made coffee and a sandwich, left the kettle simmering for Devlin and went through to switch on the television set.

The image took unusually long to form—McKay was turning back, puzzled, when the screen fluoresced at last. Glowing red across it was the same pattern he had noticed on the ambulance window. The screen cracked a moment later and McKay ducked just in time as the tube imploded.

The TV lamp overturned, plunging the room into darkness, and broken glass was everywhere. As he crunched over to disconnect the set, McKay's racing mind filled in the gaps. The Al Tanrai had the satellite bugged, all right—he guessed at the performance of the device. A two-dimensional perception pickup stretched across the Interface, clinging to the surface of the ship as it went through? No re-entry to burn it off. Opening the airlock would not break its tension and the first man out would carry it with him, flowing like an invisible veil, seeking another surface to cling to. He and Devlin had had unwittingly carried it here—and though the unexpected flux of electrons had burned it out, all its impressions up to now had gone *somewhere*.

Intuitively, McKay guessed it. Somewhere in the regions beyond Earth, into which the Interface was beginning to penetrate, a signal had been received. Somewhere among those stars, in some orbital or planetary hideout, the Al Tanrai had found Earth again.

With a heavy heart he picked up the phone, to call the U.N. and alert the Committee for Earth's Defense. ★

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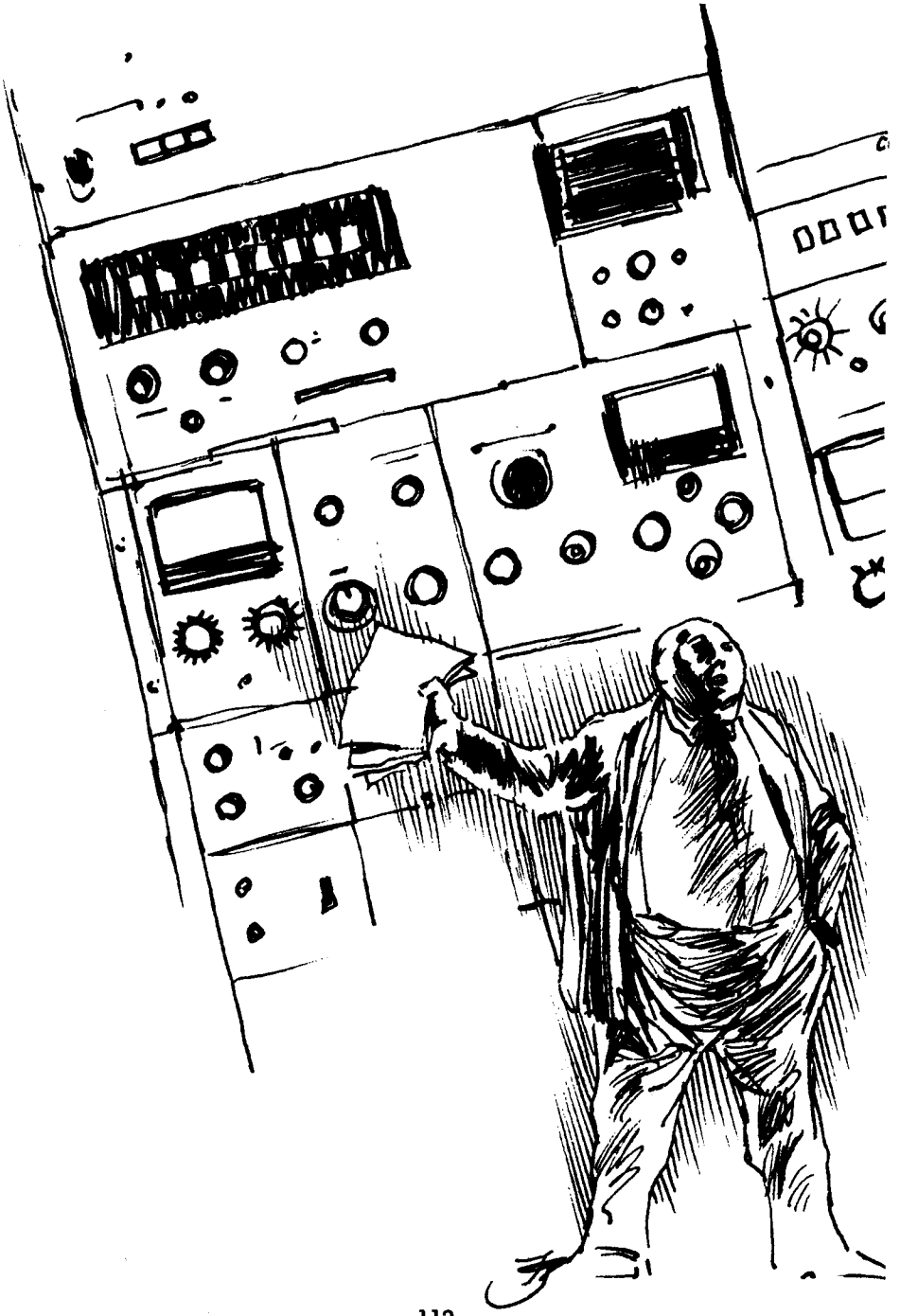

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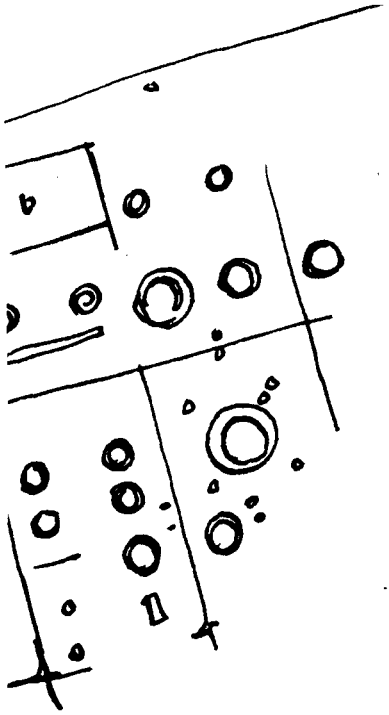

DEFENDER OF DEATH

GORDON EKLUND

Eternal life poses a question. Is it reward—or punishment?

I

JOHN MILLBURN NANCE was the biggest, grossest, fattest, most domineering sloppy old man in the entire Western Hemispheric Union, including all the people who lived in, under, and above the oceans, lakes and rivers.

John Millburn Nance was also the most brilliant criminal lawyer of his time.

He sat in a chair that had been especially built to accommodate his bulk and spoke to his wife, who lay in her bed at his side. Nance

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talked in a gentle, soothing voice, but even his softest whispers were normally powerful enough to pierce all but the most securely sound-proofed walls. As a young man, Nance had spent many years perfecting his voice as an instrument absolutely essential to the successful performance of his profession and, although he had now been retired for ten years, it was not an ability he could easily shed.

Nance spoke to his wife in a soft, gentle tone because he was still very much in love with her. They had married fifty-two years earlier and during the last ten of those years had not exchanged a single word. Nance talked to Marilyn—he did little except talk to her—but she never replied. She could not.

From the neck down Marilyn Nance was a machine. She lay in bed—where she had lain for ten years—and her husband talked to her. A never-ending series of whirrs, clicks, hums and buzzes emanated from the lower portion of her body. But she never spoke.

She should rightly have been dead. The helicar she had been driving had fallen fifty feet to strike nose-first into solid city pavement. There hadn't been much left, only a faintly beating heart, when she had been pulled from the wreckage. And soon that, too, had stopped.

John Millburn Nance had been a rich man then and he had loved his wife. So, unlike Humpty Dumpty, she had been put back together again. She could not talk and she had no arms or legs or torso, but she was alive. The best medical specialists in the WHU had all assured Nance of this one plain fact: his wife was alive.

And so, ten hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, he came to her room, sat at her side, ignored the noises that came from beneath her blankets and talked to her. He did not know if she heard him or, if she heard him, whether she understood him. He had asked the specialists and they had replied, *Yes, perhaps,* to the first question and, *No, probably not,* to the second. Nance had long since stopped caring. He talked to his wife because he happened to love her. If she heard him, if she understood him, that was merely a bonus to add to his satisfaction.

HE SAID, "I'll be leaving just as soon as we're through here and, as I said, I ought to be back in a week—two weeks at the very most.

"Yes, yes, I know what you'd say, if you could. You'd remind me that I promised never to leave these acres again. When I told you that, I meant it—and I meant it, too when I said I'd never take another case as long as that slot machine was acting as judge and jury.

"But this one is different,

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Marilyn, and I only hope you can understand. Sarah Bigelow was a very dear friend of mine once and I cared a great deal about her welfare. True, all of this was many years ago and surely she has changed since. But I did love her once. Not as I love you, but in a different way, the way a father feels about a daughter who turns out well. But, nonetheless, I did love Sarah.

"And now they say she has killed a man. I know—a hundred murders a day in this great land of ours. The killers are caught (for the most part), they are tried before that machine, they are convicted and they are treated. It is all routine.

"But for me, murder can never be a routine crime. It will always be the extraordinary one, the crime that is unlike all other crimes, the one that is most frequently committed by noncriminals.

"So, you see, Sarah is my friend, and because she is my friend, she is deserving of the best. And I'm still the best. I know more law in my little finger than all the new breed lawyers, East and West, put together."

Nance paused and wiped his hands on the edge of the covering blanket. He looked at Marilyn but, as he had known, her face was without expression. His eyes moved past her, beyond the window, outside. He looked at the sun, which stood in the sky, gazing like a proud father at the earth below it. Trees grew tall and bright out there and autumn leaves fluttered to the ground in small, bright clumps. Nance would hate to leave this place even for a week. It was more than a home. It was a magic wonderland, all five acres of it. The thought of bleak concrete in an endless city repulsed him. Nance was seventy-six years old. He had a few years left to him and he wanted to spend them all right where he was—among the trees and leaves, beneath the pink and gold sun.

He said, "If I understood the crime I wouldn't go, but I've read about it, talked to people about it, and there's no sense to be found in what I've learned. Sarah supposedly poisoned this man, Oakes. He was her boss on a top-secret government project. They've got everything they need to convict her: Evidence that points to her, a couple of eyewitnesses and a confession. They've got everything, that is, except a motive. And she wants to plead guilty.

"The government was going to supply her with a whole battery of lawyers till I stuck my nose in—through a friend—and took care of that. I'm her legally appointed attorney now. I don't think she even knows it yet—and when she finds out she'll probably be pretty unhappy. But there's

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nothing she can do. I saw to that. I'm going to save that girl whether she wants to be saved or not.

"There isn't a motive, you see. Nothing that looks vaguely like one—and there's one thing I've learned in fifty years of close association with murderers. They've all got a reason for what they've done. It might be a twisted reason. It might not have a thing to do with the actual victim. But there's a reason there, always, without fail.

"So, do you understand now why I've got to do it? Do you see why I haven't got a choice?"

Nance paused again and looked closely at his wife. Her eyes were open and staring. Her cheeks were cold and rigid. Her nostrils quivered gently.

He sighed and turned away.

"I'll have Samuel come in to take care of you. He'll be with you every second he can spare. And when he can't spare one Barbara or Eugenia or both will look after you. You won't be lonely on account of my absence and I'll be back before you know it. I'll have plenty of new stories to tell you. It's been ten years since we've been to the city and it's surely changed in the interim. There'll be a whole lot of things you'll want to know. Just wait and see."

Nance climbed unsteadily to his feet. He stood above his wife for a moment and shook himself like a wet cat. Then he turned toward the door.

His hand on the knob, he stopped and swiveled his head. He put his free hand to his lips and tossed his wife a kiss.

It was a childish thing for him to do, yes. Seventy-six years old and still tossing kisses like a boy of fifteen. But then, after all, he loved her, and it is love which brings out the child in all of us, regardless of age.

Nance passed through the door. He heard the whisking cough of the helicar immediately.

He hurried outside, muttering to himself, "I'm coming, Samuel—hold that machine steady—I'm on my way."

JOHN MILLBURN NANCE sat across from his client in a tiny, white-walled chamber. He watched her face through a plate-glass window that divided the wide wooden table into two equal halves. His chair was uncomfortable and despite his best efforts at self-control, he found himself squirming as he sat.

Sarah Bigelow was forty-seven and wore her hair tight against her scalp. Its once rich blackness was now pierced by soft wisps of gray. She had never been a beautiful woman, but when Nance had first known her, twenty years earlier, she had been at least handsome. Now, in middle age, she was not even that. She was competent looking, Nance thought, like a

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well-tuned machine, and nothing else.

"Get out," she had said when the guard had first brought Nance into the room. "Out, John—I don't want you."

Nance had shaken his head, grinned and waited for the guard to depart. Now, alone with her, he put his lips close to the glass and said, "No."

"You don't seem to understand," Sarah said. "I don't want you."

Nance said again, with certainty, "No." He shook his head. "I'm staying."

"Have it your own way, you stubborn old man, but I'm not telling you a thing."

Nance smiled at her and stuck a hand into the inner pocket of his worn suit. He pulled out a notebook, dropped it on the table and flipped through the pages. He stopped at one point and appeared to be reading, moving his lips slowly and nodding.

Without looking up from the book he said, "I have a few questions."

"I won't answer."

Nance looked up at her and smiled again. He put his hand into his pocket and withdrew a thin, filter-tipped cigarette. He put the cigarette between his lips and lit it with a match. He tossed the match over his shoulder.

"Still breaking the laws, I see," Sarah said.

Nance took a casual drag on the cigarette and exhaled through his nostrils. "Law has no right to tell a man what to do for his own good. If I want to cut ten years off my lifespan with these things, it's my right."

"Just don't get caught," she said.

"I'm careful where I do my smoking. Only in safe places—like jails and prisons."

Sarah laughed, and Nance smiled.

Nance placed the smoldering cigarette on the edge of the table. He asked, "Why are you lying?"

"Who said I was lying?"

"If you're not, then tell me why you killed Oakes."

"It's in my confession. Read it."

"Your confession is the biggest pile of rubbish I've read in my life. When I was a boy I got in the habit of reading mystery novels. Any writer who tried to use something as obviously phony as your confession would have got himself run out of the country." He flipped a page in his notebook, glanced down, then up, then down again. "You claim you killed Oakes because you were jealous of his work. To me that doesn't make the slightest bit of sense."

"But it's the truth."

Nance leaned far forward and put his lips against the glass. His jowls danced and quivered. "You say you were working late with him. You deliberately doctored

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his coffee with two tablets of HTC, knowing that he was allergic to it. He drank the coffee and the two of you went right ahead and worked for fifteen more minutes. Then, suddenly, he said he had to leave. He walked outside, sprinted down the steps and fell dead in front of four witnesses, including a deputy patrolman."

"That's the way it happened," Sarah said. "You see, I didn't know he was going to slip out on me. I planned to hide his body in—"

"Oh, close your trap." Nance slammed shut his notebook. "And get a fact or two straight in your head. First, I'm your attorney and I'm going to get you off. You can't stop me, Sarah. Your Research Associates Incorporated, they can't stop me. And your government of the Western Hemispheric Union, it can't stop me either. Nobody can. Two weeks from today at the most you're going to be a free woman."

"But I killed a man."

NANCE pulled his face away from the glass and opened his notebook again. He turned a page.

"Tell me this much," he said. "Tell me why Oakes killed himself."

His eyes leaped upward to meet hers. He was looking for something, if only a hint, but was met by blank indifference.

"I killed him."

"Why?"

"Jealousy."

"Why did you kill him so stupidly?"

"Inexperience. I'd never killed anyone before."

"You hated him?"

"Yes."

"Does anything ever excite you any more?"

"No."

"How can you hate without getting excited?"

She raised her hands in surrender, sat back and tried a smile. "Don't cross-examine me, John. You're supposed to be on my side. There's no Adjudicator here to keep score."

He leaned back in his chair and started smoking again. He said nothing until the cigarette burned his fingers. He dropped the butt and said, "You want to spend the rest of your life in prison?"

Sarah shook her head weakly. Nance had hoped to surprise her and had succeeded. But he had done more than that. He had frightened her.

"What are you talking about?" Sarah said slowly.

"There's an old law dating back to the time of the death penalty that's never been changed because there's never been a real need to change it. The laws states that anyone pleading guilty to first-degree murder will be sentenced to life imprisonment without benefit

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of parole or treatment. There can't be any treatment because no evidence has been offered in court by which to determine the type and degree of treatment. Only two kinds of people ever plead guilty to murder, anyway—madmen and fools. If you're one of them and want to plead guilty they'll lock you inside a battle-worn prison and throw the key in the ocean."

Sarah had been listening to him with total attention, nodding slowly.

Nance said, "I'll ask my question one more time: Do you want to spend the rest of your natural life in a prison cell?"

Sarah laughed sharply, then said softly, "God, no."

"You're going to plead innocent then."

"There's no way to get around this law?"

"None at all. The law's the law, Sarah."

"Then I'll do as you say."

"Good." Nance settled back in his chair and smiled at Sarah. "I'm happy to see you again," he said.

"Under these circumstances?"

"Under any circumstances. It's good."

Sarah smiled back at him. "You're looking fine, John."

"I'm feeling fine. It's living out in the country away from all this bustle and noise that does it. It's enough to take ten bad years off a man's life. You ought to give it a try yourself. Find yourself a few acres. You might have to go all the way to Alaska, but you can find some if you look. Build yourself a small house and live there. Once you've tried it you'll never want to see a city again."

She was still smiling at him, but the smile was tinged with irony now, as though she were laughing inwardly at a private joke.

Softly, Nance said, "What was the nature of the work you and Oakes were doing?"

The smile faded and Sarah said, "I can't tell you that."

"Top secret?"

"Very."

"Secrets aren't going to do you any good when they start cutting at your brain."

"They don't do that, John. It's treatment."

"Treatment that turns people into cows," he said and rose to his feet. He dusted his suit and straightened his tie. "Filthy places, jails. Man of my age ought not to hang around them."

"You're leaving now?"

"Got a few things to do," he said, moving toward the door. He rapped forcefully and heard the guard shuffling toward him. Then, wheeling his bulk, he turned on Sarah. "Oakes killed himself," he said.

Sarah blurted, "No."

"What I thought," Nance said.

The guard arrived and let him out.

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II

NANCE established himself at the old Parks Hotel on Marshall Street off Reed Avenue. He was happy to see that it hadn't changed much over the years. The windows were fully as filthy as ever. The carpet was worn and soiled. Dust floated through the air in steady rivers. The mattress was as hard as a rock.

Nance was lying on the bed, smoking a cigarette and trying to find a comfortable position when the knock came.

"Willy?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Nance."

"Door's open."

Nance did not move to greet his visitor. Willy was a pallid little man of indeterminate age, slouched stance and a suit three sizes too big for him.

"Been a long time," Willy said, approaching the bed. "I've missed you, Mr. Nance."

"Missed you, too, Willy. There's liquor on the shelf over the sink."

"Never touch it any more, Mr. Nance. Stuff's bad for the heart, you know."

"You still work, however? You haven't relinquished that pleasure for the good of your heart?"

"No, sir. Still on the job."

"Good." Nance rolled on his side so that he faced Willy. "I want information about three people in particular. One is my client, Sarah Bigelow. Another is the victim, Jeffrey Oakes. The third is a man named Karlton Cabot. He's chief project officer at Research Associates Incorporated, where both Sarah and Oakes worked before the trouble. I want every scrap you can find on all three of them, going back twenty, thirty years."

Willy made notes in a small pad. "This might not be as easy as it sounds. The government is touchy about people asking certain questions."

"You'll get around them, Willy. I have the greatest confidence in your abilities. Now, my second request: I want you to find out everything you can about the project Oakes and Sarah were working on. It's called Project Lazarus, a bit of information I had to pry teeth apart in order to obtain. And it's all the information I have, too. If you can find one bit more I'll pay you a five-hundred-dollar bonus."

"Anything else?"

"For the moment, no."

Willy pocketed his notebook and allowed himself a wry grin. "It's good working for you again, Mr. Nance. It's like twenty years ago when we were on top of it all."

"We're still on top, Willy."

"Sure, Mr. Nance, of course. You were always the best. You got killers off that scared me to look at."

"It was my job, Willy, same as your job is putting your nose into

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places it doesn't properly belong."

Willy's grin enlarged. "You were always an honest man, Mr. Nance."

"We're two of a kind, Willy. That's why we work so well together." Nance laughed and waved at the air. "Look at us, dressed like two mummies in a dusty museum. We should have died ten years ago and let them stuff us."

"You keep smoking that tobacco and you're going to be dead."

"A detective, Willy. Keep that in mind. You're a detective and not a doctor. Please keep your healthful hints to yourself."

Willy chuckled. "You always were sensitive about those cigarettes."

"I'll be in touch, Willy."

"Right." Willy turned toward the door and took a step. He paused when he spotted a softcover book lying face-up on the carpet.

"*Red Harvest*?" he said. "You're really taking this farming life serious."

"*Red Harvest*," Nance said, emphasizing the first word. "Red, as in blood. It's murder that I'm taking seriously, Willy. Red, as in death."

THE uniformed guard jumped forward and blocked the man's progress. "Do you have a pass, sir?" he asked. The guard was a young man, barely out of his teens, who wore a light fringe of red mustache on his upper lip. At his waist he carried a gun. "You have to have one to pass this point."

Nance made a motion to push the boy aside, then thought better of it when he saw the hand reach for the weapon.

"Hold on," Nance said. "I'm too old to get shot. I want to see Karlton Cabot. A surprise visit."

"I can't let you through," the guard said, "not without a pass."

Nance tried another tack. "Is there anything top secret about a man's office?"

"I have my orders."

"What if I were to scream?"

"Sir?"

"I said, 'What if I were to scream?' What if I were to stand right here in front of you, screaming at the very top of my lungs, until you agreed to pick up that phone and tell your boss that John Millburn Nance is here, that Nance pays his taxes and that Nance wants to see him?"

The guard shook his head. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Well, I guess it won't hurt to call him."

"If you don't I'll scream." As proof, Nance gave a shrill yelp.

The guard reached quickly for the phone and dialed a number.

NANCE walked through the doorway, glaring at the lettering on the door that proclaimed,

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Karlton Cabot, Research Director, No Admittance. He slammed the door behind him. He faced the man he had come to see. Cabot was a distinguished man of about forty, who sat primly behind a hardwood desk, his hands firmly folded.

Without preamble Nance said, "I don't like your security system." He was angry. He had wanted to arrive unannounced.

Cabot grinned widely and waved a hand. Nance looked around for a chair solid enough to support his bulk, but the room was devoid of spare furniture.

"There's no need for you to sit," Cabot said. "You won't be staying that long."

"I have some questions."

"Which I cannot answer because they violate security regulations. Correct?"

"Is your security worth the price of someone's life?"

"Quite often it is worth the price of many lives. But I don't think that's pertinent in this instance."

"To me treatment meted to convicted murders is no better than death."

"I don't want to argue metaphysics with you, Nance. If that's all you have to say, I wish you'd leave. I'm a busy man."

Nance began to pace the length of the small office, forcing Cabot to follow him with his eyes. Nance said, "Do you know why he killed himself?"

"Who killed himself?"

"How about Jeffrey Oakes?"

"Oh." Cabot grinned and clenched his fists tighter. "So that's going to be your defense. It won't work. Sarah confessed. Have you forgotten that?"

"The confession was given under the shock of the moment. She intends to withdraw it."

"I heard her make it," Cabot said. "She was cold as ice at the time."

"You were here the night Oakes died?"

"I was. I've never denied it. I arrived outside about ten minutes later. Sarah was confessing to the patrolman."

"What's Project Lazarus?" Nance asked and stopped pacing long enough to watch an expression of astonishment cross Cabot's face. It was gone as quickly as it had come. Nance resumed pacing.

Cabot said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will—and soon. I'm going to haul you into court, Cabot, you and the man who gives you your orders. There's one bit of information I'm going to give you in advance: Benson versus State of New Hampshire. All classified information essential to reaching a decision must be revealed. The case, in turn, takes on the classification of the material concerned. But the information is revealed; both sides know it. I

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haven't the least hesitation about turning this into a top-secret murder trial."

"But there's nothing about Lazarus that has a bearing on your case. Nothing."

"That's easy enough for you to say, Cabot. You know that and your boss knows that—but me: I'm just a poor hick farmer with an interest in the law. I don't even know what Lazarus is about. Until I find out, I've got to act under the assumption that it does have a bearing, however tenuous, on my client's case."

"Ask her to tell you. She knows."

"I'm asking you, Cabot."

"And I'm telling you Sarah murdered Oakes for purely personal reasons."

"Cabot, Cabot." Nance sighed and stopped himself in the center of the room. "Sarah Bigelow never killed anyone in her life. You know that as well as I do. Don't lie to me."

He went for the door and jerked it open. "Your boss has twelve hours in which to agree to answer my questions. Otherwise I'll see you in court."

"You can't threaten me," Cabot said. "Go to hell."

"It's not you I'm threatening. I thought I made that clear. I don't threaten the little ones like you. I hunt big game."

Nance went out and hurried down the corridor, grinning happily. He swept past the guard, nodded at the man and continued toward the street.

"An excellent move," he muttered to himself. "Classic strategy. Ought to keep them busy, busy."

And: "Benson versus State of New Hampshire. Indeed. Oh, Lord, indeed."

Nance slid into the seat of his helicar and laughed at the face that greeted him, grinning wildly, from the rearview mirror.

NANCE glared at the machine. Sitting behind a narrow table, his client at his side—the machine covering the opposite wall and going beep and shiver, hum and click—Nance frowned, stared. He did not like any machine of any sort, but his special and particular rage was reserved for this one. The Adjudicator had gone into operation eight years ago. The fact had only confirmed the rightness of Nance's previous decision to retire.

The Adjudicator had taken the place of human judges and juries in major criminal proceedings. Civil cases and minor criminal actions were still handled in the old way, but whenever a crime was serious enough to warrant treatment for its perpetrator, the Adjudicator was wheeled into court and put to work. A nine-man special court of appeals automatically reviewed all Adjudicated verdicts, but not once—not once in eight years—had there been an overruling.

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Within the maze of its circuitry, the Adjudicator housed the entire known body of legal information, both statutory and common, and that extra-legal knowledge—such as psychology, sociology, and history—that might be required in order to arrive at a proper decision. For eight years these circuits had hummed and clicked, and not once had they been wrong.

Such infallibility was not (of course) human.

And so: Nance glared.

A young man wearing bright blue coveralls who stood at the side of the Adjudicator cleared his throat and called the court to order. City versus Sarah Bigelow. Murder in the First Degree.

While the formalities continued, Nance glanced around the room. It was nearly empty of life. There was the defense table, with himself and Sarah present. The prosecutor's table was occupied by City Attorney Frank Larrabie and two young assistants—and there was the young man in the coveralls. But these were all. There were no spectators or newsmen. Odd, Nance thought.

The young man had turned to Nance. "How does the defendent plead?"

Nance rose to his feet, deliberately dusted his vest and looked at the man. "Who are you?" he asked, in a sharp, clear voice.

"I'm the expert—John Anders."

"I see." Nance stroked his stomach. "You are in charge of this machine?"

"More or less," Anders said. "But how do you plead?"

"One moment. I've been in retirement for the past ten years, as you may know. This is my first machine-age trial. I'd like to get a few things straight. Can this thing speak?"

"Of course it can," Anders said. "It is a fully equipped Adjudicator. But I usually handle these first details."

"I see," Nance said. He sat down, waved a hand and said, "Not guilty."

Anders turned toward Larrabie. "Prosecution's case?"

LARRABIE came to his feet and approached the machine. He spoke directly to it, stating his case in plain, simple terms, telling exactly what he intended to prove. Nance listened attentively, less to Larrabie's words than to his tone and manner. He had hoped to pick up a pointer or two from Larrabie's presentation, but heard nothing but a dry, recital of facts. Larrabie's stated his arguments in clear and unemotional terms. There was no cry for retribution and punishment. Sarah Bigelow had murdered Jeffrey Oakes. He, Larrabie, had proof of this. He would present his proof to the Adjudicator and allow the machine to act upon it.

Larrabie finished and called his

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first witness. This was a city medical examiner named Blaine, who had performed an autopsy on the deceased.

Blaine, a little man whose feet barely touched the floor from a sitting position, testified that Oakes had been administered a quantity of the drug HTC sufficient to kill him. Oakes had a known history of allergies to certain drugs, including HTC. The dosage had been taken internally and had killed him within fifteen or twenty minutes, as soon as it reached his heart.

When Blaine finished the Adjudicator spoke for the first time. The voice came from the center of the machine and said, "Cross-examination, Mr. Nance?"

Nance stood up. The voice had been masculine and clear, with a definite sense of warmth and humanity to it. Nance wondered how this had been managed. The best way to get a public to accept a cold and unemotional machine would be to provide it with an attitude of warmth and human kindness.

Nance stood in front of Blaine, blocking the man's view of the rest of the room, and said, "I understand Mr. Oakes drank the HTC solution in a cup of coffee."

"Coffee was found in his stomach," Blaine said. "That is correct."

"Don't most people fix and pour their own coffee?"

"I suppose so," Blaine said.

Nance turned quickly and glanced at Larrabie, but the prosecuting attorney did not appear to be listening.

Nance shrugged and said, "Your report stated that murder was the most obvious possibility. Why murder, I want to ask. Why not suicide?"

"There was no evidence of suicide. Nor motive."

"No motive?" Nance assumed an expression of mock astonishment. "I'm an old man," he said, "and I can easily think of a dozen reasons why I ought to kill myself. And I'm a very stable man, on the record. Isn't it highly unlikely that Mr. Oakes was totally without motive for taking his own life?"

In past trials he had known Nance would never have been allowed to introduce such a doubtful argument without opposition. He felt himself pausing for the objection, but it never came. The Adjudicator flashed and hummed. Larrabie sat at his table, staring into space.

Blaine said, "I really can't say. I'm no philosopher."

"Thank you."

Nance returned to his seat.

Larrabie then called two individuals to the stand who had witnessed Jeffrey Oakes's actual death. The first was a partolman, who testified that Oakes had approached him, stumbling, had collapsed at his feet and died before medical aid could arrive.

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The second witness was a young girl who worked at RAI. She stated that she had seen Oakes fall, had gone to help him and had waited with the partolman and several others for an ambulance to arrive. Neither witness had heard Oakes speak before he died.

Nance cross-examined the girl.

"You say that Mr. Oakes said nothing in your hearing. In your opinion, could he have spoken?"

"I think so," the girl said. "He mumbled and moaned a lot."

"Then he could have spoken?"

"I guess so."

"Then, I wonder. If he had been murdered, if he knew the identity of his killer, why didn't he speak? Sarah Bigelow. He could have named her in front of a half-dozen reliable witnesses."

The girl shrugged and said, "Maybe he was too busy dying."

Nance thanked her and turned away.

He was, he knew, getting away with murder, but in this case, murder would not help him. The Adjudicator knew the law. It would automatically disregard all illegal or irrelevant testimony. Nance could introduce the possibility of suicide all he wanted. The Adjudicator would consider it only if compelled to consider it.

Nance felt hopeless. With a jury of men he had always known where he stood. He could tell by men's and women's expressions whether or not he was winning. But a machine? How did you read the expression on the face of a machine? What did the flashing lights mean? The harsh clicks? The dry hums?

The next witness was Karlton Cabot. Under Larrabie's questioning he freely discussed the personal and professional jealousy that had existed between Sarah Bigelow and Jeffrey Oakes.

Nance listened, tapped his fingernails and regarded the Adjudicator.

Cabot talked for nearly an hour. At last, Nance was invited to cross-examine.

He wasted no time. If he was going to be allowed to get away with murder, he intended to take advantage of the fact.

HE APPROACHED Cabot and crowded close to him, not speaking. He peered down his nose at the sitting man and said, "What is Project Lazarus?"

Cabot squirmed and Nance slid closer until the two men were nearly touching.

"You must answer the question," said the Adjudicator.

Nance grinned to himself and prodded the witness: "You are familiar with a Project Lazarus?"

"I am," Cabot admitted.

"Tell us what it is."

"A top-secret, government-sponsored research project which we are handling at RAI."

"You are in charge of this project?"

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"Of the research end of it, yes."

"Both Mr. Oakes and Miss Bigelow worked under you?"

"That is correct."

"What was the nature of this research?"

"That is classified."

"I am aware of that. I want to know what it is that is top-secret."

Cabot squirmed and looked wildly around for help. He found it. The Adjudicator began to hum like a bees' nest gone mad.

"This line of questioning infringes upon areas of national security. I must ask you, Mr. Nance, to move into other areas."

"But I have to know," Nance said.

"It is not relevant."

"I intend to prove differently—that it is of the utmost relevance."

"Mr. Nance, please," said the Adjudicator softly, as though correcting a child. "Knowledge of the basic nature of this project is available to me. I have studied it and assure you that it does not concern this trial. Unless you can prove otherwise, I must insist that you pursue another line of questioning."

Nance said, "Request an adjournment."

"For what purpose?"

"To gather evidence to show you that I'm right."

"I will grant you an adjournment until tomorrow."

"Thank you," Nance said and returned to his table. "Damn it," he told Sarah, "I can't work with this slot machine."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I'm guilty."

"That's for me to decide," Nance said and hurried out.

Willy was waiting in the corridor.

"How did it go?" he asked. "I couldn't get in."

"Who kept you out?"

"Federal guards. They kept everybody out."

Nance smiled. His threat had had some effect at least. "It was a bad day," he said. "Project Lazarus was declared officially irrelevant."

"You still want to find out about it?"

"Of course."

"Then come along to my office. I finally found a guy who's willing to talk."

"Who?"

"Name's Lawton. Says he's a friend of Sarah's."

"He worked on Project Lazarus?"

"He's still working on it."

"What does he have to say?"

"He won't talk to me—unless you're there. He says he doesn't know me, that he's heard of you."

"All right," Nance said. "Let's go."

III

HAD HENRY W. LAWTON not been sitting all alone in a

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very large chair in the very center of a small but bare office, Nance might not have noticed him. Lawton was that kind of man, one of those you pass a hundred times a day and whose face and features make less of an impression than a stray grain of desert sand.

Nance guessed that while Lawton might well have been a friend of Sarah's, she was not a friend of his. In fact, she had probably never even noticed him.

"She didn't do it," Lawton said as soon as Nance entered the office. Lawton looked at the floor as he spoke. "She couldn't have."

"Who couldn't have done what?" Nance said.

"Sarah couldn't have killed Mr. Oakes. What do you think?"

Nance continued forward, pulled up a chair and sat down. Willy remained on his feet. Lawton continued to stare at the bare floor. Nance kept silent. At last Lawton looked at him.

"Aren't you interested in what I have to say?"

"Of course I am, Mr. Lawton. I'm merely allowing you to tell your story in your own good time."

"I won't have to testify? This will be strictly between you and me?"

"Of course," Nance said. He was using a new voice, one that was nearly identical to that used by the Adjudicator. Nance like his new voice. "Tell me about Project Lazarus. What is it?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm asking you, Mr. Lawton."

"Lazarus. The Bible. It has to do with making people live forever."

Nance nodded slowly, as if he had known all along.

"That's what Oakes was. He was immortal."

"He was until someone murdered him."

"Nobody murdered him. He killed himself."

Willy interrupted. "A man who can live forever and he kills—"

"He was crazy," Lawton said. His eyes went back to the floor and he spoke rapidly. "I overheard him and Sarah talking a hundred times or more. She was going to be the next one, the next immortal. One more operation and . . . Anyway, he kept telling her not to go through with it—and he was always arguing with Cabot and the others. He said they had destroyed his soul. He said he could see heaven and it was a glorious place and now he'd never get there. He was doomed to live forever on Earth. In hell, he called it."

"So you think he killed himself. So that he could get to heaven."

"He talked about it all the time. I heard him say he couldn't stand to look at heaven all day, knowing he'd never get there. They all knew he was crazy. At one time they were going to lock him up— but they were afraid of that, too."

"It doesn't make sense to me,"

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Willy said. "Try handing me immortality and I'll show you what to do with it."

"Don't get the idea I mean I have definite proof he killed himself," Lawton said. "I don't. In fact—I didn't think of this before, but Cabot might have killed him. Or any of them. They were all afraid of him."

"Why were they afraid of him?" Nance said.

"Well, why do you think? They had everything tied up in this project. All sorts of government people were watching the program to see what would come of it. Everybody would like to be able to opt to live forever—even me—and here's the first immortal—Oakes— and he goes around talking about heaven and suicide. Sure, they didn't like it."

"Cabot didn't do it," Willy said. "I checked. Sarah was the only one it could have been—unless he did it himself."

"Then he did," Lawton said, flatly. He looked right at Willy. "Sarah could never kill anyone."

"I'm sure of that, too," Nance said. "And as for you Mr. Lawton, I want to tell you how much we appreciate your coming here. You may very well have saved our case for us."

Lawton rose to his feet, happy to take the hint, and walked toward the door. He stopped, looked at the floor and said, "I sure hope it works out," and left.

Nance folded his hands in his lap and sat quietly. Willy took the chair Lawton had vacated and flopped down.

At last Nance asked, "Where did you find him?"

"At home," Willy said. "I managed to get a list of people working on the project. I poked around in their lives and found Lawton. He was dying to talk, but only to you."

"A very sensible man."

"Don't tell me—you believe him."

"In part I do. It makes sense. Some of it. What else could Project Lazarus be? And there have been rumors. Yes, I think I do believe him."

"But it doesn't really prove anything, does it?"

"What do you mean, Willy?"

"Look here, Mr. Nance. I've been thinking about what Lawton said. There's still no reason why Sarah couldn't have killed him. Oakes went crazy. He was endangering the project, maybe preventing her from achieving immortality. That gives her plenty of motive for murder. It makes good sense, too."

"Yes," Nance said carefully. "It does, doesn't it?"

"So, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going back to my hotel, draw a hot bath, sit in it, read a good book. Tomorrow I'll see you in court."

"The won't let me in."

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"They will now. I'm sure they've found out all they need to know about Benson and the State of New Hampshire."

"New Hampshire—huh? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, Willy," Nance said. "Nothing at all."

NANCE sat at the defense table, his fingers tapping a rhythm, his eyes focused into space. Willy was seated to his right; Sarah to the right of Willy. Nance tried his best to ignore a steady stream of prosecution testimony that first provided Sarah Bigelow with a motive and then established her opportunity to kill.

Nance had decided to quit living in the past. If he wanted to win this case he would have to stop acting as if the time were twenty years ago. The Adjudicator did not care if he was alert and quick. It could not be swayed by an emotional appeal to the heart. The machine was only interested in facts. Well, Nance had a few of those up his sleeve. And his time was drawing near.

The prosecution droned on. Morning became noon and noon turned into early evening. At four o'clock Larrabie wrapped up his case with a final summation that was notable only for its blandness. Ten years ago it would have put the best juries to sleep. But not the Adjudicator. Larrabie knew what he was doing. The machine appeared to listen intently, sifting fact from theory, waiting for the last flat languid phrase to fall from Larrabie's lips.

When it had done so the Adjudicator said immediately, "Mr. Nance—you may present your case now."

Nance stood slowly and walked into the open part of the courtroom. Looking at Larrabie, he said, "I'd like to make a brief statement, then request an adjournment."

"It is late," the Adjudicator said, at his back. "You may proceed."

Nance kept looking at Larrabie. He refused to talk directly to a machine. Larrabie and his assistants would have to do.

"I intend," Nance said, "to show my client's innocence by a method that is, I believe, without precedent. I intend to prove her lack of guilt on the grounds that Jeffrey Oakes is not, in actuality, dead."

Nance peered closely at Larrabie, but the man's face was without expression.

Nance said, "Jeffrey Oakes is not dead. In his own fashion, he is as much alive as Mr. Larrabie here—or myself. I intend to show that he is happy where he is and that my client has not committed an antisocial act.

"I intend to ignore the question of whether she actually caused Jeffrey Oakes to leave this plane of existence. The evidence presented

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by the prosecution is both weak and circumstantial but, frankly, I have nothing that contradicts it. What I do intend to show is that Sarah Bigelow is not in need of treatment. The act of murder, in this case, is not antisocial. That is what I intend to prove."

Nance was relieved as Larrabie jumped to his feet and said, "I object to this entire line of argument. This is the biggest pile of nonsense I've heard in my life."

Nance turned to the Adjudicator and waited. The machine said, "Mr. Nance, I would like you to explain your arguments further. All my data insists that murder is an antisocial act under any circumstances."

"I'll be glad to," Nance said. He turned again, so that he faced Larrabie. "Since the dawn of time man has speculated about the possibility of life after death, about immortality in one form or another. Nearly all religions have been based on the concept that a conscious spirit of some sort, survives after the death of the body. I intend to show that Jeffrey Oakes not only believed this, but that he knew it to be true. Whoever caused his death was only supplying him with the means by which to reach another plane of existence. Oakes wanted to go there. Putting him there was not an antisocial act."

"Do you intend," asked the Adjudicator, "to prove that there are other levels of existence?"

"I intend to show the likelihood of it. Within your data banks there is, I'm sure, a great deal of information on this subject."

"There is," the machine said.

"I intend, then, to use this information, plus that which I can present here, in order to show that Jeffrey Oakes is living on another plane of existence."

"This will be tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'd like an adjournment now."

"Fine. I shall be anticipating tomorrow's testimony. Court is adjourned until ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

Nance strode back to his table and began piling papers into a neat stack. Sarah stepped past Willy and grabbed Nance by the sleeve.

"John," she said, "this is ridiculous."

"Don't you believe in life after death, Sarah?"

"I do not."

"But Oakes did."

"Whom have you been talking to, John?"

"A friend of yours," he said.

"John," Sarah said, after a pause, "I want you to drop this."

"Why?"

"I'm guilty."

"I know better than that."

"But there's no need—"

"Will you talk to me?" he said. "Tell me everything. Tomorrow—before court."

"Yes," she said, "if you promise to drop this."

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"I can't promise that until I've heard what you have to say." He tucked his papers under his arm and waved at Willy. "See you tomorrow," he told Sarah.

NANCE, facing Sarah through the glass, folded his hands and waited for the guard to depart.

When they were alone Nance still waited for Sarah to speak first.

She said tentatively, "You won't give it up? You won't just go home and let me alone?"

"I can't do it," Nance said, "even if I wanted to. I took your case because I wanted to take your case. I'm going to win your case because I've never learned how to act any other way and I'm too damned old to change."

"How much do you know?" she said.

"Nearly all of it. I know about Lazarus, if that's what you mean."

"Who told you?"

"It doesn't matter."

She sighed. "All right. I saw him put the pills in his coffee. He didn't try to hide it from me. I watched him drink, then he tried to leave. I wanted to stop him but he knocked me down. He wanted to die in public. And he did."

"Why?"

"He wanted to bring the project down with him. He was crazy. He knew if he died in the laboratory, we'd hush it up, call it a heart failure, so he went outside. The first immortal—and he killed himself."

"And then?"

"So he was dead—and there was no way to hush it up. Four people saw him die. The patrolman called an ambulance. I went out and I said I'd killed him."

"To save your project?"

"Yes, to save it. They all understood. They told me to go ahead and take the blame—they'd fix it up. I'll be convicted, yes, that's the idea, but then I'll be sent to a treatment hospital, one operated by RAI. They run several of them. I'll be held a year—five years—ten—how many it takes to complete the project. Then I'll come out. Free and immortal."

"Then this trial means nothing?"

"It means confirmation that Jeffrey was murdered. Murder is fine, but not suicide."

Nance nodded thoughtfully. "Have you ever considered the possibility that Oakes was right?"

"About the heaven he saw?"

"Yes."

"He was mad," she said firmly.

"I intend to prove otherwise."

She jumped and her fingernails hit the glass. Her face twisted and her jaws clenched.

"Sarah," he said, "sit down."

She sat.

Nance said, "I'm a defense lawyer. Years ago I set men free who weren't fit to burn in hell. But I did my job. I defended them to the best of my ability. I'm going to do the

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same for you. I can't help it. I'm going to get you off."

"No!" But she did not move.

"Yes," Nance said. And: "I'm sorry."

She said, "No," again, but softly, and began to cry.

Nance said, "People live too long as it is." He went to the door, knocked, and the guard let him out.

NANCE was late. He walked hurriedly into the courtroom, Willy at his heels, and took his seat. When Sarah saw him she turned away and stared at the wall. Nance sighed, shuffled a handful of papers and tried to look inscrutable.

The Adjudicator said, "Court has already been called to order in your absence, Mr. Nance. Would you care now to continue from the point at which we adjourned yesterday?"

Nance nodded at the papers in his hand, said, "Gladly."

He walked slowly across the room, glancing occasionally at the papers. He stopped when he reached Larrabie and looked at the man.

"I'd like to begin," Nance said, "by introducing into evidence all of the information contained within the data banks of the Adjudicator pertaining to life after death or Project Lazarus."

"That will be done," said the Adjudicator.

Larrabie glared at Nance and stood. "One moment," he said. "I believe I have the right to examine all evidence used in arriving at a verdict."

"That is correct," the Adjudicator said.

"Well, I don't have it. I don't know what you know about life after death. I don't know a thing about Project Lazarus."

"If you wish, a printout will be prepared containing my knowledge of life after death. I would estimate that such a printout will run to a couple billion words."

"That won't be necessary," Larrabie said.

"As for Project Lazarus, as you know, it is classified top secret. Two days ago, I ruled against its direct relevance in this case. That ruling is still in effect. However, if Mr. Nance wishes me to consider the nature of the project in arriving at my final verdict, that can be done without the necessity of direct testimony. My knowledge of the project would appear to be quite complete."

"Good," Nance said, as Larrabie sat. Rubbing his hands together, Nance requested that his first witness be produced. Her name was Anna May Nelson.

A guard brought her into the courtroom. She was a small, stooped old woman who wore a long black gown and a veil that covered her eyes. She took a chair near the Adjudicator, facing both

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tables, and folded her hands in her lap. The Adjudicator's expert swore her to the oath.

The preliminaries over, Nance stood in front of the woman and faced Larrabie. "Anna May Nelson," Nance said, "is an expert on the subject of life after death, which is why I have called her to testify in behalf of the defense. She is a medium, one who can contact and speak with the dead. At the present time she is in direct touch with Jeffrey Oakes. I intend to question Mr. Oakes through Mrs. Nelson."

Larrabie's lips pantomimed, *Oh, my God*—but he said nothing aloud.

Smiling, Nance turned to the witness. Her eyes were focused on empty space. Her mind seemed engaged elsewhere.

Nance said, "Can you hear me clearly, Mrs. Nelson?"

"Yes, sir," the woman said. Her voice was soft, as though it came from a long distance. "But it is loud—the noise—a humming—too loud."

Nance looked at the Adjudicator and raised an eyebrow. The machine stilled, fell silent, neither humming nor clicking. Nance turned back to his witness.

"Mrs. Nelson," he said, "I would like to speak to Jeffrey Oakes. Is this possible?"

A lengthy pause ensued. Sounds came from the woman's throat, few of them more than audible, none of them words. Nance looked around the courtroom. Larrabie and his assistants were listening, totally involved, on the edges of their seats. Sarah still faced the wall. The Adjudicator waited silently.

AT LAST a voice said, "I am Jeffrey Oakes." The tone was firm and decisive. Sarah's head jerked up and her mouth opened.

"And I, Mr. Oakes, am John Millburn Nance. I am speaking to you from Municipal Courtroom Number Seven. Every word you say can be heard by an Adjudicator. I want you to know this. I am an attorney. I am acting in behalf of Miss Sarah Bigelow who has been charged in connection with your death."

The voice laughed sharply. Anna Nelson's body shook and quivered.

"Why do you laugh, Mr. Oakes? Are you not dead?"

"I am dead," the voice said.

"How does it feel to be dead?" Nance asked.

"It feels better than . . . I feel more truly alive than I've ever felt in my life." The voice laughed again, without any note of hysteria.

"Could you describe for me and the court the world in which you now exist?"

"I—no, I don't think I can. Try describing your world to an amoeba."

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"But this world—it is one in which you consciously exist as Jeffrey Oakes?"

"Yes, it is."

"And you have full memory of your previous life on Earth?"

"I remember everything."

"I see." Nance paused and swept his glance around the courtroom. Even Sarah, even Willy, everyone sat as silently as mice.

"Your witness, Mr. Larrabie," Nance said.

Larrabie left his chair and approached the witness. Nance stood nearby, listening, ready to interrupt if necessary. But no objections were needed. Larrabie tried, but his heart was no longer in it. He asked the voice for Oakes's birthdate and got it. He tried mother's maiden name. Friends in college. Favorite food. Choice of tailor. The voice had an answer to each question.

Larrabie threw up his hands. "This woman has obviously been coached or given a good biography of Oakes to read. But it means nothing."

"Ask her about Lazarus," Nance suggested. "You won't find that in any biographies."

"Ask her yourself." Larrabie went back to his table and began whispering with his assistants.

Nance asked that Karlton Cabot be returned to the stand. Cabot was brought in. Mrs. Nelson was led out.

"How did Jeffrey Oakes feel about death?" Nance asked. He crowded close to the witness, so close that Cabot slid his chair back. Nance pressed closer yet and said, "Was he afraid of dying?"

"No," Cabot said. "He—"

"He welcomed it?"

"I didn't say that. I don't know. How should I know?"

Nance moved in. "Isn't it true that in the weeks immediately preceeding his death Jeffrey Oakes was obsessed with the idea of death?"

"You might say that," Cabot said. "But the nature of Lazarus—"

Nance cut him off with a wave. "I would like to introduce into evidence," he said, "a series of statements made to a representative of mine, before witnesses. These statements have to do with the attitudes of Jeffrey Oakes toward death. They were given by a group of his fellow employees at RAI, especially those who worked most closely with him immediately before his death. Let me read just one of these statements aloud. I believe it is representative of the rest."

"Proceed," said the Adjudicator.

Nance handed Larrabie all but one of the papers he carried in his hand. The remaining one he read aloud: "Jeffrey Oakes was a man consumed with the thought of death. He claimed that he could see heaven—and that he had also

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found hell. Hell was on Earth, he said, and he welcomed the idea of death. He said he knew he would continue to live afterward. He made these statements all the time. I heard him say them to Karl Cabot and to Sarah Bigelow. It was the way he believed. I'd never met a man who wanted to die. Oakes was the first."

Nance handed this paper to Larrabie, then turned to Cabot. "Would you like to say something about this?"

"All right," Cabot said. "The statement is true. Oakes wanted to die."

"Thank you, Mr. Cabot. I have no more questions."

Larrabie refused to cross-examine. Nance waited at his table until Cabot had been escorted from the room. Then he said, "The defense rests."

The Adjudicator, which had remained silent throughout Cabot's testimony, returned abruptly to life, clicking and humming as though it were considering the meaning of life, which in a way it was.

Nance grinned at Sarah and winked.

She sighed and smiled at him.

NANCE sat alone in his room. He still wore his old suit—his courtroom suit, he called it—but he had removed his shoes. He stared at his naked toes and wiggled them, each in turn, from left to right.

Nance was waiting for the arrival of his visitor. He was not sure of the man's identity, positive only that he had to come. Nance sat uncomfortably in a hard-backed wooden chair. His feet rested on the bed. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, depositing the ashes neatly on the carpet.

The remainder of the afternoon session had gone smoothly from Nance's point of view. When Larrabie in his summation had scoffed at Anna Nelson, Nance had offered to produce an additional one dozen mediums. Larrabie had not risen to the bait.

When his own turn arrived, Nance had acted quietly and unemotionally. He had stated his arguments as quickly as possible and returned to his seat. Sarah Bigelow had not committed a treatable act. She had merely moved Jeffrey Oakes, who wanted to be moved, from one plane of existence to another. This was not, Nance had stated, an antisocial act.

The Adjudicator's verdict would not be revealed until the following morning. Both sides were always allowed one extra day in which to produce additional evidence or testimony. If nothing happened, both he and Larrabie would be given copies of the Adjudicator's decision in the morning. It would be printed, final and irreversible.

Nance lit another cigarette and coughed. The man had to come.

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Nance was tired of waiting. He wanted out of this city as quickly as possible. He got up to pace and thought about calling Willy. He forced himself to sit back down and decided he didn't feel like chatting.

Somebody knocked on the door.

Nance called, "Who is it?"

"Karlton Cabot. I want to talk to you, Nance."

"Door's open, Cabot."

But the man who entered the room was not Cabot. This man was small, fierce-looking, and wore a crewcut. He held a cigarette in his left fist. Nance lit another of his own.

"What happened to Cabot?" Nance said.

"I left him outside." The man's voice was firm and commanding. "I'm his supervisor—Clifton Ripley."

"Pleased to meet you," Nance said. He didn't move from his chair.

"Can't say the same," Ripley said. He dropped on the bed and glared at Nance. "You've ruined a project into which I've put twenty years of my life."

"And saved a woman's sanity."

"You know better than that, Nance. I'm sure she told you. She was only a diversion. Nothing would have happened to her."

Nance said, "Better tell me what you came to tell me, Ripley."

"You already know, don't you? Larrabie has been instructed to present testimony tomorrow that proves Jeffrey Oakes killed himself."

Nance nodded.

"So, you've got what you wanted," Ripley said. "You knew we couldn't call your bluff. A decision in this case—on your terms—could blow a hole right through what little stability this country has. That damned machine loves these little intellectual games. I could just see it. Every husband in the WHU who kills his wife tomorrow defends it on the grounds he was merely moving her to a new and better plane. And vice versa. And—there's precedent."

"It's your machine," Nance said. "A judge would have told me to shut my trap. When I brought that old woman into court he would've handed me six months for contempt."

"The Adjudicator," Ripley said, "is like a child. It thinks like a ten-year-old prodigy and acts like one." He crushed his cigarette on the carpet and rose to his feet. "Your reputation is clean, Nance. You haven't lost a case. I hope this makes you happy."

Nance said nothing and Ripley went to the door. He put a hand on the knob, turned and said softly: "Why?"

Nance shook his head.

"You have something against immortality?"

"If it makes men mad," Nance said, "I do."

"But," Ripley said, smiling

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grimly, "it doesn't. I had known Oakes for twenty years. He was always a very unstable man. Brilliant, yes. He had to be to head the project. But also unstable. And now the world will know that he took his own life. We won't get another dime for Lazarus. It'll be filed away in somebody's vault. Top secret. Fifty years from now—a hundred years—maybe somebody will duplicate our work. Man will be made free to live forever. But that won't mean much to you and me, will it, Nance? We'll both be in our graves."

"Good night, Mr. Ripley," Nance said.

"Good night."

NANCE did not attend the following day's session. He did not want to see Sarah again. When he reached his home he called Willy. The information had been presented as Ripley had promised. Sarah had been set free. Oakes's death was officially regarded as a suicide. The Adjudicator's decision, whatever it had been, was gone, buried, erased, forgotten. The case against immortality was complete.

Nance did not talk to his wife about the case. He sat at her side for an hour and told her about the city. Then he realized that he didn't want to talk about that, either. He fell silent, his mouth shut, and listened to the parts beneath her blankets go *click-hum-click*.

Where are you? he wanted to ask her. Are you still there? Am I preventing you, like Oakes, from finding a better life elsewhere? Are you buried somewhere deep inside that mechanical monstrosity, waiting for the day when the switch is finally thrown and you can be free?

Nance wanted to ask her these questions, but he did not. He was afraid that somehow she might answer.

He reached down and gently drew the blankets away from the lower part of her body. He looked at the exposed parts and listened to them. *Hum*, they said evenly. *Click*, they added. *Hum* and *click*—and *click* and *hum*.

"I'm a lawyer," he said. "I do not compromise. My clients are given the best possible defense under the law. Guilty, innocent, whatever, my duty is to defend."

He put the blankets back in place and smoothed the hair out of her eyes. It was too late for her, anyway. And too late for him as well.

Nance stood up and walked outside. He strolled between the trees, looking at the blue sky, the pink clouds, the great white house in the distance. Nance moved through his own quiet world, but he moved alone. He would not visit her again today. Tomorrow would be soon enough to reestablish his routine. Today. Today, he wanted to live.

★

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(Continued from page 3)

of these two authors during one particular six-month period was entirely accidental—yet your comments on each helped to fill in the picture, as witness the following:

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I would like to add a few observations to my response to your poll.

I can only assume that adverse reader reaction to stories printed in Galaxy *led to the poll.* [Not so—the long-felt need for dialogue did. The December reader poll had been in the talking stage for a year. —Ed.] *I hope you will not let such immaturities guide you in the future selection and editing of stories.*

To deny certain aspects of humanity is to distort reality. This is an injustice to the reader. To use asterisks in a magazine intended for the "most intelligent, shockproof," etc., reader borders on the ludicrous and is a contradiction in terms.

Admittedly I found I Will Fear No Evil *offensive, not because of its emphasis on sex, however. The novel is badly written, poorly plotted . . . an insult to the intelligence.*

On the other hand, Silverberg's Urbmon *series has sexual scenes that are handled with great skill and are meaningful.*

G. Buchanan
Pittsburgh, Pa.

The December poll results are still coming in and are being tabulated. As this goes into print, the overwhelming majority view is best expressed in the phenomenon of *Galaxy's* having once again gone monthly.

During the six-month period from July to December you liked us. And you are beautiful—bombs, bouquets and bullets notwithstanding.

The National Rare Blood Club reports an unusually impressive response from your ranks to the page inspired by Robert A. Heinlein and *I Will Fear No Evil (The Raries, GALAXY, Aug.-Sept.* 1970)—so you are not only beautiful but rare.

John Brunner, whose *Easy Way Out* will be featured in next month's issue, writes from London:

Footnote to your editorial on The Raries*: I'm AB-Rh positive (3.4% incidence, according to the figure you quote) and have been a blood donor since 1953. At least once during a donor session I've been hauled out of line to provide blood for an operation currently in progress. I heartily support your recommendations.*

John

Also featured in the May *Galaxy* will be a continuation of this report—with emphasis on the results of the December poll.

—JAKOBSSON

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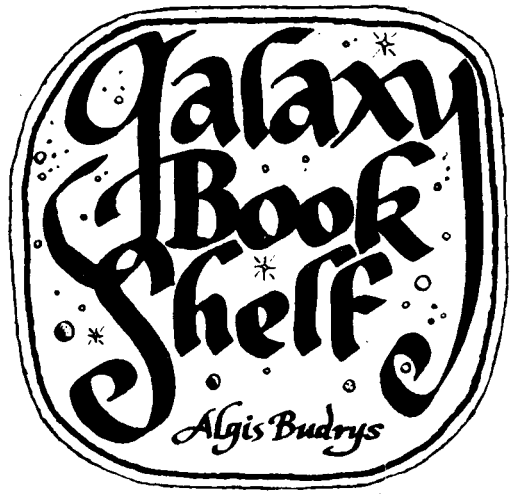

NEXT year publishers with Christmas gift books in the works should probably send me galleys or manuscript copies—or something—by July. Otherwise they'll be in the dubious position now enjoyed here by Chelsea House, purveyors of the excellent *The Pulps*, an inch-thick, 8 ½ x 11, copiously and expertly illustrated $15.00 nostalgic anthology edited by Tony Goodstone. Sam Moskowitz gets credit as "Research Consultant." Christine E. Haycock, M.D. (Mrs. Moskowitz) did the outstanding color photography of magazine covers from the famous Moskowitz collection.

Almost everything about this book is top-drawer. Chelsea House's production job merits an even higher price-tag, considering the engraving costs and the enamel stock required to include that signatureful of cover reproductions. It's really a fine thing. I hope those of you who grew up in the days when newsstands were nearly hidden under garish shingles of products like *Wild West Weekly*, *Thrilling Wonder* and *Jungle Stories* got one during the gift-giving tide. If not, I hope you can still find one for yourself now that the daisies are up.

Goodstone, an actor who doubles as a professional nostalgist—he edited the Chelsea House reprint of the Johnson Smith catalogue—knows his trade. In picture and story, *The Pulps* does exactly what its title implies; it recapitulates the sweep of the field from the earliest embryonic days of mass fiction at low prices unto its waning moments, tak-

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ing in everything from the workmanlike to the ludicrously clichéd, and from the straightforward to the raunchy, across the entire board from ranch romances to Terence X. O'Leary, dyno-blaster.

You need no other history of the field. Even allowing for its narrower focus, Quentin Reynolds' *The Fiction Factory* has now been supplanted. And as for nostalgic impact, there's no contest at all.

Mind you, you may have to turn your head off to the formalin editorial expositions that precede the gutsy samples of fiction Goodstone has selected. But these interjections *are* knowledgeable at least up to the limit of my poor power to assess, and maybe my slightly negative feeling about this aspect of the book is only a reflection of the very thing the book evokes so strongly—a recollection of how vital and ebullient pulp prose was, even the trashiest of it.

MORE ISSUES AT HAND, the second book of criticism by James Blish, is now out. You have to order it by mail, most likely. You should. The price is $5.00, and the address is Advent: Publishers, Inc., P.O. Box 9228, Chicago, Illinois 60690.

The book is officially by William Atheling, Jr., with an introduction by James Blish. As Atheling, Blish built a reputation in the fan magazines over the years as an sf critic second only (perhaps) to Damon Knight. He brings a better general education but a somewhat less pellucid expression to the task than Knight does.

This sequel to Advent's *The Issue at Hand* ($5.00) – if you don't have that one, either, now's your chance to order both at one stroke—is put together from diverse sources, not all of them fanzines as such. There's an essay on Heinlein from the short-lived professional fanzine edited by Damon Knight and Lester del Rey after the first Milford Conference. Others were originally convention speeches. All of them first saw the light of reason within the general bounds of our parish, but the tone of this book is set by a bias toward longer, more thoughtful looks at science fiction than were evident in the first volume, which was nearly confined to short takes on contemporary numbers of the professional magazines.

There are long essays on Abe Merritt and Theodore Sturgeon. There are long reviews, now cast as essays, on particular pieces by Heinlein, Kuttner, Sturgeon, Algis Budrys ("incestuous" is the word you're groping for), and others such as Brian Aldiss and Harlan Ellison, in somewhat shorter takes. There's a very good sum-

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mation of the critical literature previously extant, and the obligatory put-down of Sam Moskowitz. (Sam kind of forces it on you, is what I mean; Blish, in a singular instance, actually makes some points in refutation which strike me as valid observations unfraught by outrage. This is particularly remarkable in that in the customary case Blish is a ready outragee).

Jim has a talent for enthusiasm, both positive and negative. In my book, he has an altogether exaggerated respect for Alexei Panshin's *Heinlein in Dimension* (Advent—$6.00), and to my mind Merritt's *Ship of Ishtar* has virtues as a story which are lost on Blish as a classicist. Nor is there really a lot to be gained by noticeably going out of one's way to slap at Judy Merril, who withdrew as a target some time ago. Etc. But these punctuations of mine are the kind of thing you say to each other over beer; they are intended as tokens of respect for the book as a whole, and for the man whose thinking is reflected in it.

The essay on me, by the way, is a very long review of *Rogue Moon*, a book that went to the publisher as *The Death Machine*. (To correct Jim slightly, that remains my title of preference, with *Halt, Passenger*! and *The Armiger* as alternates, in that order. *Rogue Moon* runs somewhat behind *Sex-Gods of Luna*, but as I grow older I tolerate Fawcett's reasons better . . . not that I agree with them).

Anyhow, my major impression of that essay now is that I've had no idea I had as much in me as Jim finds. This leads me to wonder not only whether even the Blish intellect can avoid embellishment but also whether this cruder apparatus of mine makes only the already distressing number of *faux pas* it permits itself to be aware of.

SAY, it's not too late to put in a bad word for *The Andromeda Strain* (Dell #0199, $1.25), Michael Crichton's supposedly science-fictional refiguring of the *Guns of Navarrone* formula. Full of speciously factual asides and inaccurate circumstantial portrayals of applied science and technology, this compendium of false leads, directionless plot turns and cheats on the reader, belies Crichton's noteworthy skill with words. No wonder it was a 30-week best-seller in hardback. But it's a dog nevertheless.

I WISH Ballantine had sent me A.J. Langguth's *Jesus Christs* to review. (Ballantine Book #01584, 95c). My friend Ed Coudal, SF fan and former top editor for a Chicago paper, who now leases boxcars in the same shop where I sell trucks, passed it over to me as one of the most striking books, peri-

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od, in years, and certainly one of the wildest modern popular religious books ever.

It's a series of short takes about the life of Christ; Langguth's device is to suppose that Christ is inexhaustible . . . but not always knowable. He appears in various guises in various what you may call alternate worlds. Not only that, but most of the supporting players for his role are well aware of his doom from the very beginning, and reminisce, and criticize this particular given performance, in not always reverent tones. At one particular instance, the player everyone thought was Peter turns out to be the real candidate. At another, the fellow Christ meets in the desert—and suspects of being Satan—turns out to be the Christ of the next oasis, with exactly the same suspicion.

I'd like to make clear that this is by no means an irreverent book. Langguth's objective is to make the story point come alive again, and he does. He is a subtle, profound thinker as well as a delightful writer, and he has that inquiring mind we can all appreciate. I quote the opening selection in its entirety, hinting that the balance of the book may be intended as a provisional reply:

"I have come to die for your sins," Jesus told a stooped figure passing him on the road.

"Then what am I to die for?" the old man asked.

Jesus took a small notebook from his pocket and copied the question. "If I may have your name and address," he said, "an answer will be sent to you." ★

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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

This is an obscene book. It is the autobiography of Kinnall Darival, descendant of Earthlings. He is a prince of Salla, a province on the planet Borthan.

Borthan is ruled by the Covenant, a puritanical code that denies self. Even the pronoun "I" is never to be uttered—hence the "obscenity" of the autobiography. Only between bondbrothers and bondsisters is any "soul-bearing" permitted.

Forced to flee Salla when his older brother, Stirron, succeeds to the throne after an accident kills the old septarch, Kinnall is helped by his bondbrother, Noim, and bondsister, Halum. But blood-kin in the neighboring province of Glin try to turn him over to Stirron's vengeance.

Kinnall escapes once more, finds cover as a common laborer. He decides to make his way as a commoner with the help of Halum's father, who controls trade in prosperous Manneran.

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Part Two

ROBERT SILVERBERG

A TIME OF CHANGES

VII

MANNERAN, the province, was favored by the gods. The air was mild and sweet, filled all the year through with the fragrance of flowers. Winter does not reach so far south and the Mannerangi, when they would see snow, go as tourists to the Huishtor peaks and gape at the strange cold coating of whiteness that passes for water in other lands. The warm sea that borders Manneran on east and south yields food enough to feed half the continent and to the southwest there is the Gulf of Sumar as well, with further bounty. War has rarely touched Manneran, protected as it is by a shield of mountains and water from the peoples of the western lands and separated from its neighbor to the north, Salla, by the immense torrent of the River Woyn. Now and again we have attempted to invade Manneran by sea, but never with any conviction that we would be successful, nor has there been any success; when Salla engages seriously in war, the foe is always Glin.

Manneran, the city, must also have enjoyed special divine blessings. Its site is the finest natural harbor in all Velada Borthan, a deep-cut bay framed by two opposing fingers of land, jutting toward one another in such a way that no breakwaters are needed there and ships sit easily at anchor. This harbor is one mighty source of the province's prosperity. It constitutes the chief link between the eastern and western provinces, for there is little landborne commerce across the continent by way of the Burnt Lowlands and, since our world lacks natural fuels, so far as we know, airborne traffic is never likely to amount to much here. So ships of the nine western provinces travel eastward through the Strait of Sumar to the port of Manneran and ships from Manneran make regular

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calls on the western coast. The Mannerangi then retail western goods to Salla, Glin and Krell in their own vessels, reaping the usual profits of go-betweens. The harbor of Manneran is the only place on our world where men of all thirteen flags may be seen at once; and this busy commerce spills an unending flow of wealth into the coffers of the Mannerangi. In addition, their inland districts are rich in fertility, even up to the Huishtor slopes, which in their latitudes are unfrozen except at the summits. The farms of Manneran have two or three harvests a year and, by way of Stroin Gap, the Mannerangi have access to the Wet Lowlands and all the strange and valuable fruits and spices produced there. Small wonder, then, that those who love luxuries seek their fortunes in Manneran.

As if all this good fortune were not enough, the Mannerangi have persuaded the world that they live in the holiest spot on Borthan and multiply their revenues by maintaining sacred shrines as magnets for pilgrims. One might think that Threish, on the western coast, where our ancestors first settled and the Covenant was drawn up, would put itself forward as a place of pilgrimage second to none. Indeed, there is some sort of shrine in Threish and westerners too poor to travel to Manneran visit it. But Manneran has established itself as the holy of holies. The youngest of all our provinces, too, except only the breakaway kingdom of Krell; yet by a show of inner conviction and energetic advertisement has Manneran managed to make itself sacred. There is irony in this, for the Mannerangi hold more loosely to the Covenant than any of us in the thirteen provinces; their tropical life has softened them somewhat and they open their souls to one another to a degree that would get them ostracized as selfbarers in Glin or Salla. Still, they have the Stone Chapel, where miracles are reliably reported to have occurred, where the gods supposedly came forth in the flesh only seven hundred years ago, and it is everyone's hope to have his child receive his adult name in the Stone Chapel on Naming Day. From all over the continent they come for that festival, to the vast profit of the Mannerangi hostelkeepers. Why, I was named in the Stone Chapel myself.

WHEN we were docked in Manneran and the longshoremen were at work unloading our cargo I collected my pay and left ship to enter town. At the foot of the pier I paused to pick up a shore pass from the Mannerangi immigration officials. "How long will you be in town?" I was asked. Blandly I replied that I meant to stay among them for three days, al-

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though my real intent was to settle for the rest of my years in this place.

Twice before had I been in Manneran: once just out of my infancy, to be bonded to Halum, and once when I was seven, for my Naming Day. My memories of the city amounted to nothing more than vague and random patterns of colors: the pale pink, green and blue tones of the buildings, the dark green masses of the heavy vegetation, the black solemn interior of the Stone Chapel. As I walked away from the waterfront those colors bombarded me again and glowing images out of my childhood shimmered before my dazzled eyes. Manneran is not built of stone, as our northern cities are, but rather of a kind of artificial plaster, which they paint in light pastel hues, so that every wall and facade sings joyfully and billows like a curtain in the sunlight. The day was a bright one and the beams of light bounced gaily about, setting the streets ablaze and forcing me to shade my eyes. I was stunned also by the complexity of the streets. Mannerangi architects rely greatly on ornaments; the buildings are decked with ornate ironwork balconies, fanciful scrollings, flamboyant rooftiles, gaudy window-draperies, so that the northern eye beholds at first glance a monstrous baffling clutter, which resolves itself only gradually into a vista of elegance and grace and proportion. Everywhere, too, are plants: trees line both sides of each street, vines cascade from window-boxes, flowers burst into bloom in curbside gardens and the hint of lush vegetation is evident in the sheltered courtyards of the houses. The effect is refined and sophisticated, an interplay of jungle profusion and disciplined urban textures. Manneran is an extraordinary city, subtle, sensuous, languorous, overripe.

My childhood recollections did not prepare me for the heat. A steamy haze hung over the streets. The air was wet and heavy. I felt I could almost touch the heat, could seize it and grasp it, could wring it like water from the atmosphere. It was raining heat and I was drenched in it. I was clad in a coarse, heavy gray uniform, the usual wintertime issue aboard a Glinish merchant ship, and this was a sweltering spring morning in Manneran; two dozen paces in that stifling humidity and I was ready to rip off my chafing clothes and go naked.

A TELEPHONE directory gave me the address of Segvord Helalam, my bondsister's father. I hired a taxi and went there. Helalam lived just outside the city, in a cool, leafy suburb of grand homes and glistening lakes; a high brick wall shielded his house from the view of passersby. I rang

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at the gate and waited to be scanned. A voice within the house, some butler, no doubt, queried me over the scanner line and I replied, "Kinnall Darival of Salla, bondbrother to the daughter of the High Justice Helalam, wishes to call upon the father of his bondsister."

"The Lord Kinnall is dead," I was informed coldly, "and so you are some impostor."

I rang again. "Scan this and judge if he be dead," I said, holding up to the machine's eye my royal passport, which I had kept so long concealed. "This is Kinnall Darival before you and it will not go well with you if you deny him access to the High Justice!"

"Passports may be stolen. Passports may be forged."

"Open the gate!"

There was no reply. A third time I rang and this time the unseen butler told me that the police would be summoned unless I departed at once. I had not reckoned on any of this. Would I have to go back to town, take lodgings, write Segvord Helalam for an appointment and offer evidence that I still lived?

By good fortune I was spared those bothers. A sumptuous black groundcar drew up. of a kind used generally only by the highest aristocracy, and from it stepped Segvord Helalam, High Justice of the Port of Manneran. He was then at the height of his career and he carried himself with kingly grace: a short man but well constructed, with a fine head, a florid face, a noble mane of white hair, a look of strength and purpose. His eyes, an intense blue, were capable of flashing fire and his nose was an imperial beak, but he canceled all his look of ferocity with a warm, ready smile. He was recognized in Manneran as a man of wisdom and temperance. I went immediately toward him, with a glad cry of "Bondfather!" Swinging about, he stared at me in bewilderment and two large young men who had been with him in his groundcar placed themselves between the High Justice and myself as though they believed me to be an assassin.

"Your bodyguard may relax," I said. "Are you unable to recognize Kinnall of Salla?"

"The Lord Kinnall died last year," Segvord replied quickly.

"That comes as grievous news to Kinnall himself," I said. I drew myself tall, resuming princely mien for the first time since my sad exit from the city of Glain, and gestured at the High Justice's protectors with such fury that they gave ground, slipping off to the side. Segvord studied me carefully. He had last seen me at my brother's coronation; two years had gone by since then and the last softness of childhood had been stripped from me. My year of felling logs showed

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in the contours of my frame, my winter among the farmers had weathered my face and my weeks as a sailor had left me grimy and unkempt, with tangled hair and a shaggy beard. Segvord's gaze cut gradually through these transformations until he was convinced of my identity; then suddenly he rushed at me, embracing me with such fervor that I nearly lost my footing in surprise. He cried my name and I cried his; then the gate was opening and he was hurrying me within. The lofty cream-colored mansion loomed before me, the goal of all my wanderings and turmoil.

I WAS conducted to a pretty chamber and told that it was to be mine. Two servant girls came to me. Plucking off my sweaty seaman's garb, they led me, giggling all the while, to a huge tiled tub, bathed and perfumed me, cropped my hair and beard somewhat and let me pinch and tumble them a bit. They brought me clothes of fine fabric, of a sort I had not worn since my days as royalty, all sheer and white and flowing and cool. And they offered me jewelry, a triple ring set with—I later learned—a sliver of the Stone Chapel's floor, and also a gleaming pendant, a tree crystal from the land of Threish, on a leather thong. At length, after several hours of polishing, I was deemed fit to present to the High Justice. Segvord received me in the room he called his study, which actually was a great hall worthy of a septarch's palace, in which he sat enthroned even as a ruler would. I recall feeling some annoyance at his pretensions, for not only was he not royal, but he was of the lower aristocracy of Manneran. He had been of no stature whatever until his appointment to high office had put him on the road to fame and wealth.

I asked at once after my bond-sister Halum.

"She fares well," he said, "though her soul was darkened by the tidings of your supposed death."

"Where is she now?"

"On holiday, in the Sumar Gulf, on an island where we have another home."

I felt a chill. "Has she married?"

"To the regret of all who love her, she has not."

"Is there anyone, though?"

"No," Segvord said. "She seems to prefer chastity. Of course, she is very young. When she returns, Kinnall, perhaps you could speak to her, pointing out that she might think now about making a match, for now she might have some fair lord, while in a few years' time there will be new maidens ahead of her in line."

"How soon will she be back from this island?"

"At any moment," said the High Justice. "How amazed she will be, to find you here!"

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I ASKED him concerning my death. He replied that word had come two years earlier that I was mad and had wandered, helpless and deluded, into Glin. "Then," he said, "there were reports that the Lord Stirron had sent agents into Glin after you, so that you could be brought back for treatment. And lastly, this summer past, one of your brother's ministers gave it out that you had gone roaming in the Glinish Huishtors in the pit of winter and had been lost in the snows—in a blizzard no man could have survived."

"But of course the Lord Kinnall's body was not recovered in the warm months of the year gone by and was left to wither in the Huishtors, instead of being brought back to Salla for a proper burial."

"There was no news of finding the body, no."

"Then obviously," I said, "the Lord Kinnall's body awakened in the springtime, trekked about on a ghostly parade, went its way southward and now at last has presented itself on the doorstep of the High Justice of the Port of Manneran."

Segvord laughed. "A healthy ghost!"

"A weary one, as well."

"What befell you in Glin?"

"A cold time in more ways than one." I told him of my snubbing at the hands of my mother's kin, of my stay in the mountains and all the rest. When he had heard that, he wished to know what my plans were in Manneran; to this I replied that I had no plans other than to find some honorable enterprise, succeed in it, marry and settle down, for Salla was closed to me and Glin held no temptations. Segvord nodded gravely. There was, he said, a clerkship open at this very moment in his office. The job carried little pay and less prestige and it was absurd to ask a prince of Salla's royal line to accept it, but still it was clean work, with a fine chance of advancement, and it might serve to give me a foothold while I acclimated myself to the Mannerangi way of life. I told him at once that I would gladly enter his employ, with no heed to my royal blood, since all that was behind me now, done with and imaginary besides. "What one makes of himself here," I said soberly, "will depend wholly on his merits, not on the circumstances of rank and influence." Which was, of course, pure piffle: instead of trading on my high birth, I would instead here make capital out of being bondbrother to the High Justice of the Port's daughter, a connection that had come to me because of my high birth alone—and where was the effect of merit in any of that?

THE searchers are getting closer to me all the time. Yesterday,

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while on a long walk through this zone of the Burnt Lowlands, I found well south of here the fresh track of a groundcar impressed deep in the dry and fragile crust of the red sand. And this morning, idly strolling in the place where the hornfowl gather—drawn there by some suicidal impulse, maybe—I heard a droning in the sky and looked up to see a plane of the Sallan military passing overhead. One does not often see sky-vehicles here. It swooped and circled, hornfowl-fashion, but I huddled under a twisted erosion-knoll and I think I went unnoticed.

I might be mistaken about these intrusions: the groundcar just some hunting party casually passing through the region, the plane merely out on a training flight. But I think not. If there are hunters here, I am the prey they hunt. The net will close about me. I must try to write more quickly and be more concise; too much of what I need to say is yet untold and I fear being interrupted before I am done. Stirron, let me be for just a few more weeks!

VIII

THE High Justice of the Port is one of Manneran's supreme officials. He holds jurisdiction over all commercial affairs in the capital. If there are disputes between merchants they are tried in his court and by treaty he has authority over the nationals of every province, so that a seacaptain of Glin or Krell, a Sallan or a westerner, when hailed before the High Justice, is subject to his verdicts with no rights of appeal to the courts of his homeland. This is the High Justice's ancient function, but if he were nothing but an arbiter of mercantile squabbles he would hardly have the grandeur that he possesses. However, over the centuries other responsibilities have fallen to him. He alone regulates the flow of foreign shipping into the harbor of Manneran, granting trade permits for so many Glinish vessels a year, so many from Threish, so many from Salla. The prosperity of a dozen provinces is subject to his decisions. Therefore he is courted by septarchs, flooded with gifts, buried in kindnesses and praise, in the hope that he will allow this land or that an extra ship in the year to come. The High Justice, then, is the economic filter of Velada Borthan, opening and closing commercial outlets as he pleases; he does this not by whim but by consideration of the ebb and flow of wealth across the continent.

The office is not hereditary, but the appointment is for life. A High Justice can be removed only through intricate and well-nigh impracticable impeachment procedures. Thus it comes to pass that a vigorous High Justice, such as Segvord Helalam, can become

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more powerful in Manneran than the prime septarch himself. The septarchy of Manneran is in decay in any case; two of the seven seats have gone unfilled for the past hundred years or more and the occupants of the remaining five have ceded so much of their authority to civil servants that they are little more than ceremonial figures. The prime septarch still has some shreds of majesty, but he must consult with the High Justice of the Port on all matters of economic concern. And the High Justice has entangled himself so inextricably in the machinery of Manneran's government that it is difficult to say truly who is the ruler and who the civil servant.

On my third day in Manneran, Segvord took me to his courthouse to contract me into my job. I, who was raised in a palace, was awed to see the headquarters of the Port Justiciary; what amazed me was not its opulence (for it had none) but its great size. I beheld a broad yellow-colored brick structure, four stories high, squat and massive, that seemed to run the entire length of the waterfront, two blocks inland from the piers. Within it at worn desks in high-ceilinged offices were armies of drudging clerks, shuffling papers and stamping receipts. Segvord led me on an endless march through the building, receiving the homage of the workers as he passed their dank and sweaty offices; he paused here and there to greet someone, to glance casually at some half-written report, to study a board on which, apparently, the movements of every vessel within three days' journey of Manneran were being charted. At length we entered a noble suite of rooms, far from the bustle and hurry I had just seen. Here the High Justice himself presided. Showing me a cool and splendidly furnished room adjoining his own chamber, Segvord told me that this was where I would work.

The contract I signed was like a drainer's: I pledged myself to reveal nothing of what I might learn in the course of my duties, on pain of terrible penalties. For its part the Port Justiciary promised me lifetime employment, steady increases of salary and various other privileges of a kind princes do not normally worry about.

Quickly I discovered that I was to be no humble inkstained clerk. As Segvord had warned me, my pay was low and my rank in the bureaucracy almost nonexistent, but my responsibilities proved to be great ones; in effect, I was his private secretary. All confidential reports intended for the High Justice's eyes would cross my desk first. My task was to discard those that were of no importance and to prepare abridgements of the others, all but those I deemed to be of the highest perti-

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nence, which went to him complete. If the High Justice is the economic filter of Velada Borthan, I was to be the filter's filter, for he would read only what I wished him to read and make his decisions on the basis of what I gave him. Once this was clear to me I knew that Segvord had placed me on the path to great power in Manneran.

IMPATIENTLY I awaited Halum's return from her isle in the Gulf of Sumar. Neither bondsister nor bondbrother had I had for over two years and drainers could not take their place; I ached to sit up late at night with Halum or Noim, as in the old days, opening self to self. Noim was somewhere in Salla, I supposed, but I knew not where and Halum, though she was said to be due back imminently from holidaying, did not appear in my first week in Manneran, nor the second. During the third, I left the Justiciary office early one day, feeling ill from the humidity and the tensions of mastering my new role and was driven to Segvord's estate. Entering the central courtyard, I caught sight of a tall, slender girl at the far end, plucking from a vine a golden flower for her dark glossy hair. I could not see her face, but from her figure and bearing I had no doubt of her, and joyfully I cried, "Halum!" and rushed across the courtyard. She turned frowning to me, halting me in mid-rush. Her brow was furrowed and her lips were tight together; her gaze was chilly and remote. What did that cold glance mean? Her face was Halum's face—dark eyes, fine slim proud nose, firm chin, bold cheekbones—and yet her face was strange to me. Could two years have changed my bondsister so greatly? The main differences between the Halum I remembered and the woman I saw were subtle ones, differences of expression, a tilt of the eyebrows, a flicker of the nostrils, a quirking of the mouth, as though the whole soul itself within her had altered. Also there were some minor differences of feature, I saw as I drew nearer, but these could be ascribed to the passing of time or to the faults of my memory. My heart sped and my fingers trembled and an odd heat of confusion spread across my shoulders and back. I would have gone to her and embraced her, but suddenly I feared her in her transformations.

"Halum?" I said uncertainly, hoarse-voiced, dry-throated.

"She is not yet here." A voice like falling snow, deeper than Halum's, more resonant, colder.

I was stunned. Like enough to Halum to be her twin! I knew of only one sister to Halum, then still a child, not yet sprouting her breasts. It was not possible for her to have concealed from me all her

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life a twin or a sister somewhat older. But the resemblance was extraordinary and disturbing. I have read that on old Earth they had ways of making artificial beings out of chemicals, that could deceive even a mother or a lover with the likeness to some real person—and I could well have been persuaded that moment that the process had come down to us, across the centuries, across the gulf of night, and that this false Halum before me was a devilishly clever synthetic image of my true bondsister.

I said, "Forgive this foolish error. One mistook you for Halum."

"It happens often."

"Are you some kin of hers?"

"Daughter to the brother of the High Justice Segvord."

She gave her name as Loimel Helalam. Never had Halum spoken to me of this cousin—or if she had I had no recollection of it. How odd that she had hidden from me the existence of this mirror-Halum in Manneran! I told her my name and Loimel recognized it as that of Halum's bondbrother, of whom she had evidently heard a good deal. She softened her stance a little and some of the chill that was about her now thawed. For my part I was over the shock of finding the supposed Halum to be another and I was beginning to warm to Loimel, for she was beautiful and desirable and – unlike Halum herself—available. I could by looking at her out of one eye pretend to myself that she was indeed Halum—I even managed to deceive myself into accepting her voice as my bondsister's. Together we strolled the courtyard, talking. I learned that Halum would come home this evening and that Loimel was here to arrange a hearty reception for her; I learned also some things about Loimel, for, in the injudicious fashion of many Mannerangi, she guarded her privacy less sternly than a northerner would. She told me her age: a year older than Halum (and I also). She told me she was unmarried, having recently terminated an unpromising engagement to a prince of an old but unfortunately impoverished family of Mannerangi nobility. She explained her resemblance to Halum by saying that her mother and Halum's were cousins, as well as her father's being brother to Halum's. And five minutes later, when we walked arm in arm, she hinted scandalously that in fact the High Justice had invaded his elder brother's bridal couch long ago, so that she was properly half-sister to Halum, not cousin. And she told me much more.

I COULD think only of Halum, Halum, Halum, Halum. This Loimel existed for me solely as a reflection of my bondsister. An hour after we first met, Loimel and I were together in my bedroom

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and when her gown had dropped from her I told myself that Halum's skin must be creamy as this, that Halum's breasts must be much like these, that Halum's thighs could be no less smooth, that Halum's nipples would also turn to turrets when a man's thumbs brushed their tips. Then I lay naked beside Loimel and made her ready for taking with many cunning caresses; soon she gasped and cried out. But an instant before I would have taken her the thought came coldly to me, *Why, this is forbidden—to have one's bondsister* . . . and my passion left me.

It was only a momentary embarrassment: looking down at her face, I told myself brusquely that this was Loimel and not Halum. My manhood revived and our bodies joined. Yet how intricately our loins are linked to our minds and how tricky a thing it is when we embrace a woman while pretending she is another!

That evening my bondsister Halum at last returned from her holiday in the Gulf of Sumar and wept with happy surprise to see me alive and in Manneran. When she stood beside Loimel I was all the more amazed by their near twinship: Halum's waist was more slender, Loimel's bosom deeper, but one finds these variations even in true sisters and in most ways of the body Halum and her cousin seemed to have been stamped from the same mold. Yet I was struck by a profound and subtle difference also, most visible in the eyes, through which, as the poem says, shines the inner light of the soul. The radiance that came from Halum was tender, gentle and mild, like the first soft beams of sunlight drifting through a summer morning's mist; Loimel's eyes gave a colder, harsher glow, that of a sullen winter afternoon. As I looked from one girl to the other I formed a quick intuitive judgment: *Halum is pure love, and Loimel is pure self.* But I recoiled from that verdict the instant it was born. I did not know Loimel; I had not found her thus far to be anything but open and giving; I had no right to disparage her in that way.

The two years had not aged Halum so much as burnished her and she had come to the full radiance of her beauty. She was deeply tanned and in her short white sheath she seemed like a bronzed statue of herself; the planes of her face were more angular than they had been, giving her a delicate look of almost boyish charm; she moved with floating grace. The house was full of strangers for this her homecoming party. After our first embrace she was swept away from me and I was left with Loimel. But toward the end of the evening I claimed my bondright and took Halum away to my chamber, saying, "There is two

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years' talking to do." Thoughts tumbled chaotically in my mind: how could I tell her all that had happened to me—How could I learn from her what she had done, all in the first rush of words? I could not arrange my thinking. We sat down facing one another at a prim distance, Halum on the couch where only a few hours before I had coupled with her cousin, pretending then to myself that she was Halum. A tense smile passed between us. "Where can one begin?" I said and Halum, at the same instant, said the same words. That made us laugh and dissolved the tension. And then I heard my own voice asking, without preamble, whether Halum thought that Loimel would accept me as her husband.

LOIMEL and I were married by Segvord Helalam in the Stone Chapel at the crest of the summer, after months of preparatory rituals and purifications. We made these observances by request of Loimel's father, a man of great devoutness. For his sake we undertook a rigorous series of drainings—day after day I kneeled and yielded up the full contents of my soul to a certain Jidd, the best known and most costly drainer in Manneran. When this was done Loimel and I went on pilgrimage to the nine shrines of Manneran and I squandered my slender salary on candles and incense. We even performed the archaic ceremony known as the Showing, in which she and I stepped out on a secluded beach one dawn, chaperoned by Halum and Segvord and, screened from their eyes by an elaborate canopy, formally disclosed our nakedness to one another, so that neither of us could say afterward that we had gone into marriage concealing defects from the other.

The rite of union was a grand event, with musicians and singers. My bondbrother Noim, summoned from Salla, stood up as pledgeman for me and ring-linker to be. Manneran's prime septarch, a waxen old man, attended the wedding, as did most of the local nobility. The gifts we received were of immense value. Among them was a golden bowl inlaid with strange gems, manufactured on some other world and sent to us by my brother Stirron, along with a cordial message expressing regret that affairs of state required him to remain in Salla. Since I had snubbed his wedding it was no surprise that he snubbed mine. What did surprise me was the friendly tone of his letter. Making no reference to the circumstances of my disappearance from Salla, but offering thanks that the rumor of my death had proven false, Stirron gave me his blessing and asked me to come with my bride for a ceremonial visit to his capital as soon as we

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were able. Apparently he had learned that I meant to settle permanently in Manneran—and so would be no rival for his throne; therefore he could think of me warmly again.

I often wondered, and after all these years still do wonder, why Loimel accepted me. She had just turned down a prince of her own realm because he was poor: here was I, also a prince, but an exiled one, and even poorer. Why take me? For my charm in wooing? I had little of that; I was still young and thick-tongued. For my prospects of wealth and power? At that time those prospects seemed feeble indeed. For my physical appeal? Certainly I had some of that, but Loimel was too shrewd to marry just for broad shoulders and powerful muscles. I concluded, finally, that there were two reasons why Loimel took me. First, she was lonely and troubled after the breakup of her other trothing. Second, Loimel envied Halum in all things and knew that by marrying me she would gain possession of the one thing Halum could never have.

My own motive for seeking Loimel's hand needs no deep probing to uncover. It was Halum I loved; Loimel was Halum's image; Halum was denied me, therefore I took Loimel. Beholding Loimel, I was free to think I beheld Halum. Embracing Loimel, I might tell myself I embraced Halum. When I offered myself to Loimel as husband, I felt no particular love for her and had reason to think I might not even like her; yet I was driven to her as the nearest proxy to my true desire.

Marriages contracted for such reasons as Loimel's and mine do not often fare well. Ours thrived poorly; we began as strangers and grew even more distant the longer we shared a bed. In truth I had married a secret fantasy, not a woman. But we must conduct our marriages in the world of reality. And in that world my wife was Loimel.

MEANWHILE, in my office at the Port Justiciary, I struggled to do the job my bondfather had given me. Each day a formidable stack of reports and memoranda reached my desk; each day I tried to decide which must go before the High Justice and which were to be ignored. At first, naturally, I had no grounds for judgment. Segvord helped me, though, as did several of the senior officials of the Justiciary, who rightly saw that they had more to gain by serving me than by trying to block my inevitable rise. I took readily to the nature of my work and before the full heat of summer was upon Manneran I was operating confidently, as if I had spent the last twenty years at my tasks.

Most of the material submitted

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for the guidance of the High Justice was nonsense. I learned swiftly to detect that sort by a quick scanning, often by looking at just a single page. The style in which reports and/or proposals were written told me much: I found that a man who cannot phrase his thoughts cleanly on paper probably has no thoughts worth notice. The style is the man. If the prose is heavy-footed and sluggish so, too, in all likelihood, is the mind of its author. A coarse and common mind offers coarse and common perceptions. I had to do a great deal of writing myself, summarizing and condensing the reports of middling value, and whatever I have learned of the literary art may be traced to my years in the service of the High Justice. My style, too, reflects the man, for I know myself to be earnest, solemn, fond of courtly gestures and given to communicating more perhaps than others really want to know; all these traits I find in my own prose. It has its faults, yet am I pleased with it: I have my faults, yet am I pleased with me.

Before long I realized that the most powerful man in Manneran was a puppet whose strings I controlled. I decided which cases the High Justice should handle, I chose the applications for special favor that he would read, I gave him the capsuled commentaries on which his verdicts were based. Segvord had not accidentally allowed me to attain such power. It was necessary for someone to perform the screening duties I now handled and, until my coming to Manneran, the job had been done by a committee of three, all ambitious to hold Segvord's title some day. Fearing those men, Segvord had arranged to promote them to positions of greater splendor but lesser responsibility. Then he slid me into their place. His only son had died in boyhood; all his patronage therefore fell upon me. Out of love of Halum he had coolly chosen to make a homeless Sallan prince one of the dominant figures of Manneran.

IT WAS widely understood—by others long before me—how important I was going to be. Those princes at my wedding had not been there out of respect for Loimel's family, but to curry favor with me. The soft words from Stirron were meant to insure I would show no hostility to Salla in my decision-making. Doubtless my royal cousin Truis of Glin now was wondering uneasily if I knew that it was his doing that the doors of his province had closed in my face; he too sent a fine gift for my marriage day. Nor did the flow of gifts cease with the nuptial ceremony. Constantly there came to me handsome things from those whose interests were bound up in the doings of the Port Justiciary. In Salla we would call such gifts

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by their rightful name, which is bribes; but Segvord assured me that in Manneran there was no harm in accepting them as long as I did not let them interfere with my objectivity of judgment. Now I realized how, on the modest salary of a judge, Segvord had come to live in such princely style.

So I found my place in Manneran. I mastered the secrets of the Port Justiciary, developed a feel for the rhythms of maritime commerce and served the High Justice ably. I moved among princes and judges and men of wealth. I purchased a small but sumptuous house close by Segvord's and soon had the builders out to increase its size. I worshiped, as only the mighty do, at the Stone Chapel itself and went to the celebrated Jidd for my drainings. I was taken into a select athletic society and displayed my skills with the feathered shaft in Manneran Stadium. When I visited Salla with my bride the springtime after our wedding, Stirron received me as if I were a Mannerangi septarch, parading me through the capital before a cheering multitude and feasting me royally at the palace. My first son, who was born that autumn, I named for him.

Two other sons followed, Noim and Kinnall, and daughters named Halum and Loimel. The boys were straightbodied and strong; the girls promised to show the beauty of their namesakes. I took great pleasure in heading a family. I longed for the time when I could have my sons with me hunting in the Burnt Lowlands or shooting the rapids of the River Woyn; meanwhile I went hunting without them and the spears of many hornfowl came to decorate my home.

Loimel, as I have said, remained a stranger to me. One does not expect to penetrate the soul of one's wife as deeply as that of one's bondsister, but nevertheless, despite the customs of self-containment we observe, one expects to develop a certain communion with someone one lives with. I never penetrated anything of Loimel's except her body. The warmth and openness she had showed me at our first meeting vanished swiftly and she became as aloof as any coldbelly wife of Glin. Once in the heat of lovemaking I used "I" to her, as I sometimes did with whores. She slapped me and twisted her hips to cast me from her loins. We drifted apart. She had her life, I mine; after a time we made no attempt to reach across the gulf to one another. She spent her time at music, bathing, sunsleeping and piety; I at hunting, gaming, rearing my sons and doing my work. She took lovers and I took mistresses. It was a frosty marriage. We scarcely ever quarreled; we were not close enough even for that.

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Noim and Halum were with me much of the time. They were great comforts to me.

At the Justiciary my authority and responsibility grew year by year. I was not promoted from my position as clerk to High Justice, nor did my salary increase by any large extent; yet all of Manneran knew that I was the one who governed Segvord's decisions and I enjoyed a lordly income of "gifts." Gradually Segvord withdrew from most of his duties, leaving them to me. He spent weeks at a time on his island retreat in the Gulf of Sumar, while I initialed and stamped documents in his name. In my twenty-fourth year, which was his fiftieth, he gave up his office altogether. Since I was not a Mannerangi by birth, it was impossible for me to become High Justice in his place; but Segvord arranged for the appointment of an amiable nonentity as his successor, one Noldo Kalimol, with the understanding that Kalimol would retain me in my place of power.

You would be right to assume that my life in Manneran was one of ease and security, of wealth and authority. Week flowed serenely into week and, though perfect happiness is given to no man, I had few reasons for discontent. The failings of my marriage I accepted placidly, since deep love between man and wife is not often encountered in our kind of society; as for my other sorrow, my hopeless love for Halum, I kept it buried deep within me—and when it rose painfully close to the surface of my soul I soothed myself by a visit to the drainer Jidd. I might have gone on uneventfully in that fashion to the end of my days, but for the arrival in my life of Schweiz the Earthman.

IX

EARTHMEN come rarely to Borthan. Before Schweiz I had seen only two, both in the days when my father held the septarchy. The first was a tall red-bearded man who visited Salla when I was about five years old; he was a traveler who wandered from world to world for his own amusement and had just crossed the Burnt Lowlands alone and on foot. I remember studying his face with intense concentration, searching for the marks of his otherworldly origin—an extra eye, perhaps, horns, tendrils, fangs.

He had none of these, of course, and so I openly doubted his story of having come from Earth. Stirron, with the benefit of two years' more schooling than I, was the one who told me, in a jeering tone, that all the worlds of the heavens had been settled by people from Earth, including our own, which was why an Earthman looked just like

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any of us. Nevertheless, when a second Earthman showed up at court a few years later, I still searched for fangs and tendrils. This one was a husky, cheerful man with light brown skin, a scientist making a collection of our native wildlife for some university in a far part of the galaxy. My father took him into the Burnt Lowlands to get hornfowl; I begged to go along and was whipped for my nagging.

I dreamed of Earth. I looked it up in books and saw a picture of a blue planet with many continents and a huge pockmarked moon going around it and I thought, *This is where we all came from. This is the beginning of everything.* I read of the kingdoms and nations of old Earth, the wars and devastation, the monuments, the tragedies. The going forth into space, the attainment of the stars. There was a time when I even imagined I was an Earthman myself, born on that ancient planet of wonders and brought to Borthan in babyhood to be exchanged for a septarch's true son. I told myself that when I grew up I would travel to Earth and walk through cities ten thousand years old, retracing the line of migration that had led my forefathers' forefathers from Earth to Borthan. I wanted to own a piece of Earth, too, some potsherd, some bit of stone, some battered coin, as a tangible link to the world at the heart of man's wanderings. And I longed for some other Earthman to come to Borthan, so that I could ask him ten thousand thousand questions, so that I could beg a slice of Earth for myself—but none came and I grew up and my obsession with the first of man's planets faded.

Then Schweiz crossed my way.

Schweiz was a man of commerce. Many Earthmen are. At the time I met him he had been on Borthan a couple of years as representative of an exporting firm based in a solar system not far from our own; he dealt in manufactured goods and sought our furs and spices in return. During his stay in Manneran he had become entangled in controversy with a local importer over a cargo of stormshield furs from the northwestern coast. The man tried to give Schweiz poor quality at a higher-than-contracted price; Schweiz sued and the case went to the Port Justiciary. This was about three years ago and a little more than three years after the retirement of Segvord Helalam.

The facts of the case were clear-cut and there was no doubt about the judgment. One of the lower justices approved Schweiz' plea and ordered the importer to make good on his contract with the swindled Earthman. Ordinarily I would not have become involved in the matter. But, when the

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papers on the case came to High Justice Kalimol for routine review just prior to affirmation of verdict, I glanced at them and saw that the plaintiff was an Earthman.

Temptation speared me. My old fascination with that race—my delusion of fangs and tendrils and extra eyes—took hold of me again. I had to talk with him. What did I hope to get from him? The answers to the questions that had gone unanswered when I was a boy? Some clue to the nature of the forces that had driven mankind to the stars? Or merely amusement, a moment of diversion in an overly placid life?

I asked Schweiz to report to my office.

HE CAME in almost on the run, a frantic, energetic figure in clothes of flamboyant style and tone. Grinning with a manic glee, he slapped my palm in greeting, dug his knuckles into my desktop, pushed himself back a few steps and began to pace the room.

"The gods preserve you, your grace!" he cried.

I thought his odd demeanor, his coiled-spring bounciness and his wild-eyed intensity stemmed from fear of me, for he had good reason to worry, called in by a powerful official to discuss a case that he thought he had won. But I found later that Schweiz' mannerisms were expressions of his own seething nature, not of any momentary and specific tension.

He was a man of middle height, very sparely built, not a scrap of fat on his frame. His skin was tawny and his hair was the color of dark honey; it hung down in a straight flow to his shoulders. His eyes were bright and mischievous, his smile quick and sly and he radiated a boyish vigor, a dynamic enthusiasm, that charmed me just then, though it would eventually make him an exhausting companion for me. Yet he was no boy: his face bore the first lines of age and his hair, abundant though it was, was starting to go at the crown.

"Be seated," I said, for his capering was disturbing me. I wondered how to launch the conversation. How much could I ask him before he claimed Covenant at me and sealed his lips? Would he talk about himself and his world? Had I any right to pry into a foreigner's soul in a way that I would not dare do with a man of Borthan? I would see. Curiosity drove me. I picked up the sheaf of documents on his case—for he was looking at the file unhappily—and held them toward him, saying, "One places the first matters first. Your verdict has been affirmed. Today High Justice Kalimol gives his seal and within a moonrise you'll have your money."

"Happy words, your grace."

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"That concludes the legal business."

"So short a meeting? It seems hardly necessary to have paid this call to exchange only a moment's talk, your grace."

"One must admit," I said, "that you were summoned here to discuss things other than your lawsuit."

"Eh, your grace?" He looked baffled and alarmed.

"To talk of Earth," I said. "To gratify the idle inquisitiveness of a bored bureaucrat. Is that all right? Are you willing to talk a while, now that you've been lured here on the pretense of business? You know, Schweiz, one has always been fascinated by Earth and by Earthmen." To win some rapport with him, for he still was frowning and mistrustful, I told him the story of the two other Earthmen I had known and of my childhood belief that they should be alien in form. He relaxed and listened with pleasure and before I was through he was laughing heartily.

"Fangs!" he cried. "Tendrils!" He ran his hands over his face. "Did you really think that, your grace? That Earthmen were such bizarre creatures? By all the gods, your grace, I wish I had some strangeness about my body that could give you amusement!"

I flinched each time Schweiz spoke of himself in the first person. His casual obscenities punctured the mood I had attempted to build. Though I tried to pretend nothing was amiss, Schweiz realized his blunder and, leaping to his feet in obvious distress, said, "A thousand pardons! One tends to forget one's grammar sometimes, when one is not accustomed to—"

"No offense is taken," I said hastily.

"You must understand, your grace, that old habits of speech die hard—and in using your language one sometimes slips into the mode most natural for himself, even though—"

"Of course, Schweiz. A forgivable lapse." He was trembling. "Besides," I said, winking, "I'm a grown man. Do you think I'm so easily shocked?" My use of the vulgarities was deliberate, to put him at his ease. The tactic worked; he subsided, calming.

I ASKED him to tell me about Earth, the mother of us all.

"A small planet," he said. "Far away. Choked in its own ancient wastes; the poisons of two thousand years of carelessness and overbreeding stain its skies and its seas and its land. An ugly place."

"In truth, ugly?"

"There are still some attractive districts. Not many of them, and nothing to boast about. Some trees, here and there. A little grass. A lake. A waterfall. A valley. Mostly the planet is a dung-

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hole. Earthmen often wish they could uncover their early ancestors, bring them to life again and then throttle them. For their selfishness. For their lack of concern for the generations to come. They filled the world with themselves and used up everything."

"Is this why Earthmen built empires in the skies, then, to escape the filth of their home world?"

"Part of it is that, yes," Schweiz said. "There were so many billions of people. And those who had the strength to leave all went out and up. But it was more than running away, you know. It was a hunger to see strange things, a hunger to undertake journeys, a hunger to make fresh starts. To create new and better worlds of man. A string of Earths across the sky."

"And those who did not go?" I asked. "Earth still has those other billions of people?" I was thinking of Velada Borthan and its sparse forty or fifty millions.

"Oh, no, no. It's almost empty now, a ghost-world, ruined cities, cracking highways. Few live there any longer. Fewer are born there every year."

"But you were born there?"

"On the continent called Europe, yes. One hasn't seen Earth for almost thirty years, though. Not since one was fourteen."

"You don't look that old," I said.

"One reckons time in Earth-length years," Schweiz explained. "By your figuring one is only approaching the age of thirty."

"Also this one," I said. "And here also is one who left his homeland before reaching manhood." I was speaking freely, far more freely than was proper, yet I could not stop myself. I had drawn out Schweiz and felt an impulse to offer something of my own in return. "Going out from Salla as a boy to seek his fortune in Glin, then finding better luck in Manneran after a while. A wanderer, Schweiz, like yourself."

"It is a bond between us, then."

Could I presume on that bond? I asked him, "Why did you leave Earth?"

"For the same reasons as everyone else. To go where the air is clean and a man stands some chance to become something. The only ones who spend their whole lives there are those who can't help but stay."

"And this is the planet that all the galaxy reveres?" I said in wonder. "The world of so many myths! The planet of boys' dreams! The center of the universe—a pimple, a boil!"

"You put it well."

"Yet it is revered."

"Oh, revere it, revere it, certainly!" Schweiz cried. His eyes were aglow. "The fountain of mankind! The grand originator of the species! Why not revere it, your grace? Revere the bold beginnings that were made there. Re-

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vere the high ambitions that sprang from its mud. And revere the terrible mistakes, too. Ancient Earth made mistake after mistake –and choked itself in error, so that you would be spared from having to pass through the same fires and torments." Schweiz laughed harshly. "Earth died to redeem you starfolk from sin. How's that for a religious notion? A whole liturgy could be composed around that idea. A priestcraft of Earth the redeemer." Suddenly he leaned forward and asked, "Are you a religious man, your grace?"

I was taken aback by the thrusting intimacy of his question. But I put up no barriers.

"Certainly," I said.

"You go to the godhouse, you talk to the drainers, the whole thing?"

I WAS caught. I could not help but speak.

"Yes," I said. "Does that surprise you?"

"Not at all. Everyone on Borthan seems to be genuinely religious. Which amazes one. You know, your grace, one isn't religious in the least, oneself. One tries, one has always tried, one has worked so *hard* to convince oneself that there are superior beings out there who guide destiny—and sometimes one almost makes it, your grace. One almost believes, one breaks through into faith, but then skepticism shuts things down every time. And one ends by saying, No, it isn't possible, it can't be, it defies logic and common sense. Logic and common sense!"

"But how can you live all your days without a closeness to something holy?" I asked.

"Most of the time one manages fairly well. Most of the time."

"And the rest of the time?"

"That's when one feels the impact of knowing one is entirely alone in the universe. Naked under the stars and the starlight hitting the exposed skin, burning, a cold fire—and no one to shield one from it, no one to offer a hiding place, no one to pray to, do you see? The sky is ice and the ground is ice and the soul is ice and who's to warm it? There isn't anyone. You've convinced yourself that no one exists who can give comfort. One wants some system of belief, one wants to submit, to get down and kneel, to be governed by metaphysics, you know? To believe, to have faith! And one can't. And that's when the terror sets in. The dry sobs. The nights of no sleeping." Schweiz' face was flushed and wild with excitement; I wondered if he could be entirely sane. He reached across the desk, clamped his hand over mine—the gesture stunned me but I did not pull back—and said hoarsely, "Do you believe in gods, your grace?"

"Surely."

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"In a literal way? You think there's a god of travelers, a god of fishermen, a god of farmers and one who looks after septarchs and—"

"There is a force," I said, "that gives order and form to the universe. The force manifests itself in various ways. And for the sake of bridging the gap between ourselves and that force, we regard each of its manifestations as a 'god,' yes, and extend our souls to this manifestation or that one, as our needs demand. Those of us who are without learning accept these gods literally, as beings with faces and personalities. Others realize that they are metaphors for the aspects of the divine force—and not a tribe of potent spirits living overhead. But there is no one in Velada Borthan who denies the existence of the force itself."

"One feels such fierce envy of that," said Schweiz. "To be raised in a culture that has coherence and structure, to have such assurance of ultimate verities, to feel oneself part of divine scheme—how marvelous that must be! To enter a system of belief—it would almost be worth putting up with this society's great flaws to have something like that."

"Flaws?" Suddenly I found myself on the defensive. "What flaws?"

Schweiz narrowed his gaze and moistened his lips. Perhaps he was calculating whether I would be hurt or angered by what he meant to say. "*Flaws* was possibly too strong a word," he replied. "One might say instead, this society's limits, its—well, its narrowness. One speaks now of the necessity to shield one's self from one's fellow men that you impose. The taboos against reference to self, against frank discourse, against any opening of the soul—"

"Has one not opened his soul to you today in this very room?"

"Ah," Schweiz said, "but you've been speaking to an alien, to one who is no part of your culture, to someone you secretly suspect of having tendrils and fangs! Would you be so free with a citizen of Manneran?"

"No one else in Manneran would have asked such questions as you have been asking."

"Maybe so. One lacks a native's training in self-repression. These questions about your philosophy of religion, then—do they intrude on your privacy of soul, your grace? Are they offensive to you?"

"One has no objections to talking of such things," I said, without much conviction.

"But it's a taboo conversation, isn't it? We weren't using naughty words, except that once when one slipped, but we were dealing in naughty ideas, establishing a naughty relationship. You let your wall down a little way, eh? For which one is grateful. One's been here so long—years now—and one

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hasn't ever talked freely with a man of Borthan, not once! Until one sensed today that you were willing to open yourself a bit. This has been an extraordinary experience, your grace." The manic smile returned. He moved jerkily about the office. "One had no wish to speak critically of your way of life here," he said. "One wished in fact to praise certain aspects of it, while trying to understand others."

"Which to praise, which to understand?"

"To understand your habit of erecting walls about yourselves. To praise the ease with which you accept divine presence. One envies you for that. As one said, one was raised in no system of belief at all and is unable to let himself be overtaken by faith. One's head is always full of nasty skeptical questions. One is constitutionally unable to accept what one can't see or feel—and so one must always be *alone*. And one goes around the galaxy seeking for the gateway to belief, trying this, trying that, and one never finds—" Schweiz paused. He was flushed and sweaty. "So you see, your grace, you have something precious here, this ability to let yourselves become part of a large power. One would wish to learn it from you. Of course, it's a matter of cultural conditioning. Borthan still knows the gods and Earth has outlived them. Civilization is young on this planet. It takes thousands of years for the religious impulse to erode."

"And," I said, "this planet was settled by men who had strong religious beliefs, who specifically came here to preserve them and who took great pains to instill them in their descendants."

"That, too. Your Covenant. Yet that was—what, fifteen hundred, two thousand years ago? It could all have crumbled by now, but it hasn't. It's stronger than ever. Your devoutness, your humility, your denial of self—"

"Those who couldn't accept and transmit the ideals of the first settlers," I pointed out, "were not allowed to remain among them. That had its effect on the pattern of the culture. The consenters stayed; the rejecters went."

"You're speaking of the exiles who went to Sumara Borthan?"

"You know the story, then?"

"Naturally. One picks up the history of whatever planet one happens to be assigned to. Sumara Borthan, yes. Have you ever been there, your grace?"

"Few of us visit that continent," I said.

"Ever thought of going?"

"Never."

"There are those who do go there," Schweiz said and gave me a strange smile. I meant to ask him about that, but at that moment a secretary entered with a stack of documents and Schweiz hastily rose. "One doesn't wish to

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consume too much of your grace's valuable time. Perhaps this conversation could be continued at another hour?"

"One hopes for the pleasure of it," I told him.

WHEN Schweiz had gone I sat a long while with my back to my desk, closing my eyes and replaying in my mind the things we had just said to one another. How readily he had slipped past my guard! How quickly we had begun to speak of inner matters! True, he was an otherworlder and with him I did not feel entirely bound by our customs. Yet we had grown dangerously close so extraordinarily fast. Ten minutes more and I might have been as open as a bondbrother to him and he to me. I was astounded and dismayed by my easy dropping of propriety, by the way he had drawn me slyly into such intimacy.

Was it wholly his doing? I had sent for him, I had been the first to ask the close questions. I had set the tone. He had sensed from that some instability in me and he had seized upon it, quickly flipping the conversation about, so that I was the subject and the interrogator. And I had gone along with it. Reluctantly but yet willingly, I had opened to him. I was drawn to him and he to me. Schweiz the tempter! Schweiz the exploiter of my weakness, hidden so long, hidden even from myself! How could he have known I was ready to open?

His high-pitched rapid speech still seemed to echo in the room. Asking. Asking. Asking. And then revealing. *Are you a religious man? Do you believe in literal gods? If only I could find faith! How I envy you. But the flaws of your world. The denial of self. Would you be so free with a citizen of Manneran? Speak to me, your grace. Open to me. I have been alone here so long.*

How could he have known—when I myself did not know?

A strange friendship had been born. I asked Schweiz to dine at home with me; we feasted and talked, the blue wine of Salla flowed and the golden wine of Manneran—and when we were warmed by our drinking we discussed religion once more: Schweiz' difficulties with faith and my convictions that the gods were real. Halum came in and sat with us an hour. Afterward she remarked to me on the power of Schweiz to loosen tongues, saying, "You seemed more drunk than you have ever been, Kinnall. And yet you shared only three bottles of wine, so it must have been something else that made your eyes shine and your words so easy." I laughed and told her that a recklessness came over me when I was with the Earthman, that I found it hard to abide by custom with him.

At our next meeting, in a tavern by the Justiciary, Schweiz said,

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"You love your bondsister, eh?"

"Of course one loves one's bondsister."

"One means, though, you *love* her." With a knowing snigger.

I drew back, tense. "Was one then so thoroughly wined the other night? What did one say to you of her?"

"Nothing," he replied. "You said it all to her. With your eyes, with your smile. And no words passed."

"May we talk of other things?"

"If your grace wishes."

"This is a tender theme—and painful."

"Pardon, then, your grace. One only meant to confirm one's guess."

"Such love as that is forbidden among us."

"Which is not to say that it sometimes exists, eh?" Schweiz asked and clinked his glass against mine.

In that moment I made up my mind never to meet with him again. He looked too deep and spoke too freely of what he saw. But four days afterward, coming upon him on a pier, I invited him to dine a second time. Loimel was displeased by the invitation. Nor would Halum come, pleading another engagement; when I pressed her, she said that Schweiz made her uncomfortable. Noim was in Manneran, though, and joined us at the table. We all drank sparingly and the conversation was a stilted and impersonal one until, with no perceptible shifting of tone, we found ourselves telling Schweiz of the time when I had escaped from Salla in fear of my brother's jealousies—and Schweiz was telling us of his departure from Earth.

When the Earthman went home that night Noim said to me, not altogether disapprovingly, "There are devils in that man, Kinnall."

"THIS taboo on self-expression," Schweiz asked me when we were together another time. "Can you explain it, your grace?"

"You mean the prohibition against saying 'I' and 'me?' "

"Not that as much as the whole pattern of thought that would have you deny there are such things as 'I' and 'me,' he said. "The commandment that you must keep your private affairs private at all times, except only with bond-kin and drainers. The custom of wall-building around oneself that affects even your grammar."

"The Covenant, you mean?"

"The Covenant," said Schweiz.

"You say you know our history?"

"Much of it."

"You know that our forefathers were stern folk from a northern climate, accustomed to hardship, mistrustful of luxury and ease, who came to Borthan to avoid

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what they saw as the contaminating decadence of their native world?"

"Was it so? One thought only that they were refugees from religious persecution."

"Refugees from sloth and self-indulgence," I said. "They left Earth long ago, thousands of years ago, because they felt its ways were shameful, and settled on another world where they hoped they could live in the rightful path. And their ways hardened there, so that they were mocked by those who did not share their harsh beliefs. So they migrated again, coming from that world to this. And, coming here, they established a code of conduct to pass down through the generations to protect their children's children against corruption."

"The Covenant."

"The Covenant, yes. The pledge they made each to each, the pledge that each of us makes to all his fellow men on his Naming Day. When we swear never to force our turmoils on another, when we vow to be strong-willed and hardy of spirit, so that the gods will continue to smile on us. And so on and so on. We are trained to abominate the demon that is self."

"Demon?"

"So we regard it. A tempting demon that urges us to make use of others instead of relying on our own strengths."

"Where there is no love of self, there is neither friendship nor sharing," said Schweiz.

"Perhaps so."

"And thus there is no trust."

"We specify areas of responsibility through contract," I said. "There is no need for knowledge of the souls of others, where law rules. And in Velada Borthan no one questions the rule of law."

"You say you abominate self," said Schweiz. "It seems, rather, that you glorify it."

"How so?"

"By living apart from one another, each in the castle of his skull. Proud. Unbending. Aloof. Uncaring. The reign of self indeed, and no abomination of it!"

"You put things oddly," I said. "You invert our customs—and think you speak wisely."

"Has it always been like this," Schweiz asked, "since the beginning of settlement.

"Yes," I said. "Except among those malcontents you know of who fled to the southern continent. The rest of us abide by the Covenant. And our customs harden: thus we now may not talk of ourselves in the first person singular, since this is a raw exposure of self, but in medieval times this could be done. On the other hand, some things soften. Once we were guarded even in giving our names to strangers. We spoke to one another only when absolutely necessary. We show more trust nowadays."

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"But not a great deal."

"But not a great deal," I admitted.

"And is there no pain in this for you? Every man sealed against all others? Do you never say to yourselves that there must be a happier way for humans to live?"

"We abide by the Covenant."

"With ease or with difficulty?"

"With ease," I said. "The pain is not so great when you consider that we have bond-kin, with whom we are exempted from the rule of selflessness. And the same with our drainers."

"To others, though, you may not complain, you may not unburden a sorrowful soul, you may not seek advice, you may not expose your desires and needs, you may not speak of dreams and fantasies and romance, you may not talk of anything but chilly, impersonal things." Schweiz shuddred. "Pardon, your grace, but one finds this a harsh way to live. One's own search has constantly been for warmth and love and human contact, for sharing, for opening—and this world seems to elevate the opposite of what one prizes most highly."

"Have you had much luck," I asked, "finding warmth and love and human contact?"

Schweiz shrugged. "It has not always been easy."

"For us there is never loneliness, since we have bond-kin. With Halum, with Noim, with such as these to offer comfort, why does one need a world of strangers?"

"And if your bond-kin are not close at hand? If one is wandering, say, far from them in the snows of Glin?"

"One suffers, then. And one's character grows tougher. But that is an exceptional situation. Schweiz, our system may force us into isolation, yet it also guarantees us love."

"But not the love of husband for wife. Not the love or father for child."

"Perhaps not."

"And even the love of bond-kin is limited. For you yourself, eh, have admitted that you feel a longing for your bonsister Halum that cannot be—"

I CUT him off, telling him sharply, "Speak of other things!" Color flared in my cheeks; my skin grew hot.

Schweiz nodded and smiled a chastened smile. "Pardon, your grace. The conversation became too intense; there was loss of control but no injury meant."

"Very well."

"The reference was too personal. One is abashed."

"You meant no injury," I said, guilty over my outburst, knowing he had stung me at a vulnerable place and that I had overreacted to the bite of truth. I poured more wine. We drank in silence for a time.

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Then Schweiz said, "May one make a proposal, your grace? May one invite you to take part in an experiment that may prove interesting and valuable to you?"

"Go on," I said, frowning, ill at ease.

"You know," he began, "that one has long felt uncomfortably conscious of his solitary state in the universe—and that one has sought without success some means of comprehending his relationship to that universe. For you the method lies in religious faith, but one has failed to reach such faith because of his unfortunate compulsion toward total rationalism. Eh? One cannot break through to that larger sense of *belonging* by words alone, by prayer alone, by ritual alone. This thing is possible for you; and one envies you for it. One finds himself trapped, isolated, sealed up in his skull, condemned to metaphysical solitude: a man apart, a man on his own. One does not find this state of godlessness enjoyable or desirable. You of Borthan can tolerate the sort of emotional isolation you impose on yourselves, since you have the consolations of your religion, you have drainers and whatever mystical mergings-with-the-gods the act of draining gives you; but the one who speaks to you now has no such advantages."

"All this we have discussed many times," I said. "You spoke of a proposal, an experiment."

"Be patient, your grace. One must explain oneself fully, step by step."

Schweiz flashed me his most charming smile and turned on me eyes that were bright with visionary schemes. His hands roamed the air expressively, conjuring up invisible drama as he said, "Perhaps your grace is aware that there are certain chemical substances—drugs, yes, call them drugs—that allow one to make an opening into the infinite or at least to have the illusion that one has made such an opening—to attain a brief and tentative glimpse into the mystic realms of the intangible. Eh? Known for thousands of years, these drugs, used in the days before Earthmen ever went to the stars. Employed in ancient religious rites. Employed by others as a substitute for religion, as a secular means of finding faith, the gateway to the infinite for such as this one, who can get there no other way."

"Such drugs are forbidden in Velada Borthan," I said.

"Of course, of course! For you they offer a means of sidestepping the processes of formal religion. Why waste time at a drainer's if you can expand your soul with a pill? Your law is wise on this point. Your Covenant could not survive if you allowed these chemicals to be used here."

"Your proposal, Schweiz?"

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"One first must tell you that he has used these drugs himself and found them not entirely satisfactory. True, they open the infinite. True, they let one merge with the Godhead. But only for moments: a few hours at best. And at the end of it one is as alone as before. It is the illusion of the soul's opening itself. Whereas this planet produces a drug that can provide the real thing."

"What?"

"In Sumara Borthan," said Schweiz, "dwell those who fled the rule of the Covenant. One is told that they are savages, going naked and living on roots and seeds and fish; the cloak of civilization has dropped away from them and they have slipped back into barbarism. So one learned from a traveler who had visited that continent not long ago. One also learned that in Sumara Borthan they use a drug made from a certain powdered root, which has the capacity of opening mind to mind, so that each can read the inmost thoughts of the other. It is the very opposite of your Covenant, do you see? They know one another from the soul out, by way of this drug they eat."

"One has heard stories of the savagery of those folk," I said.

Schweiz put his face close to mine. "One confesses himself tempted by the Sumaran drug. One hopes that if he could ever get inside another mind he could find that community of soul for which he has searched so long. It might be the bridge to the infinite that he seeks, the spiritual transformation. Eh? In quest of revelations he has tried many substances. Why not this?"

"If it exists."

"It exists, your grace. This traveler who came from Sumara Borthan brought some of it with him to Manneran and sold some of it to the curious Earthman." Schweiz drew forth from a pocket a small glossy envelope and held it toward me. It contained a small quantity of some white powder; it could have been sugar. "Here it is," he said.

I stared at it as if he had pulled out a flask of poison.

"Your proposal?" I demanded. "Your experiment, Schweiz?"

"Let us share the Sumaran drug," he said.

XI

I MIGHT have slapped the powder from his hand and ordered his arrest. I might have commanded him to get away from me and never come near again. I might at the very least have cried out that it was impossible I would ever touch any such substance. But I did none of those things. I chose instead to be coolly intellectual, to show casual curiosity, to remain calm and play conversational games with him. Thus I en-

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couraged him to lead me a little deeper into the quicksand.

I said, "Do you think that one is so eager to contravene the Covenant?"

"One thinks that you are a man of strong will and inquiring mind who would not miss an opportunity for enlightenment."

"Illegal enlightenment?"

"All true enlightenment is illegal at first, within its context. Even the religion of the Covenant: were your forefathers not driven out of other worlds for practicing it?"

"One mistrusts such analogy. We are not talking of religions now. We talk of a dangerous drug. You ask one to surrender all the training of his lifetime and open himself to you as he has never done even to bond-kin—or even to a drainer."

"Yes."

"And you imagine that one might conceivably be willing to do such a thing?"

"One imagines that you might well emerge transformed and cleansed, if you could bring yourself to try," Schweiz said.

"One might also emerge scarred and twisted."

"Doubtful. Knowledge never injures the soul. It only purges that which encrusts and saps the soul."

"How glib you are, Schweiz! Look, though: can you believe it would be possible to give one's inner secrets to a stranger, to a foreigner, to an otherworlder?"

"Why not? Better to a stranger than to a friend. Better to an Earthman than a fellow citizen. You'd have nothing to fear: the Earthman would never try to judge you by the standards of Borthan. There will be no criticisms, no disapprovals of what's under your skull. And the Earthman will leave this planet in a year or two on a journey of hundreds of light-years —and what then will it matter that your mind once merged with his?"

"Why are you so eager to have this merger happen?"

"For eight moontimes," he said, "this drug has been in one's pocket, while one hunts for someone to share it with. It looked as though the search would be in vain. Then one met you and saw your potential, your strength, your hidden rebelliousness—"

"One is aware of no rebelliousness, Schweiz. One accepts his world completely."

"May one bring up the delicate matter of your attitude toward your bondsister? That seems a symptom of a fundamental discontent with the restrictions of your society."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"You would know yourself better after sampling the Sumaran drug. You would have fewer perhapses and more certainties."

"How can you say this if you

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haven't had the drug yourself?"

"So it seems to one."

"It is impossible," I said.

"An experiment. A secret pact. No one would ever know."

"Impossible."

"Is it that you fear to share your soul?"

"One is taught that such sharing is unholy."

"The teachings can be wrong," he said. "Have you never felt the temptation? Have you never tasted such ecstasy in a draining that you wished you might undergo the same experience with someone you loved, your grace?"

AGAIN he caught me in a vulnerable place. "One has had such feelings occasionally," I admitted. "Sitting before some ugly drainer, and imagining he were Noim instead, or Halum, that the draining were a two-way flow —"

"Then you already long for this drug and don't realize it!"

"No. No."

"Perhaps," Schweiz suggested, "it is the idea of opening to a stranger that dismays you and not the concept of opening itself. Perhaps you would take this drug with someone other than the Earthman, eh? With your bondbrother? With your bondsister?"

I considered that. Sitting down with Noim, who was to me like a second self, and reaching his mind on levels that had never been available to me before and he reaching mine. Or with Halum—or with Halum—

Schweiz, you tempter!

He said, after letting me think a while, "Does the idea please you? Here, then. One will surrender his chance with the drug. Take it, use it, share it with one whom you love." He pressed the envelope into my hand. It frightened me; I let it fall to the table as if it were aflame.

I said, "But that would deprive you of your hoped-for fulfilment."

"No matter. One can get more of the drug. One may perhaps find another partner for the experiment. Meanwhile you would have known the ecstasy. Even an Earthman can be unselfish. Take it, your grace. Take it."

I gave him a dark look. "Would it be, Schweiz, that this talk of taking the drug yourself was only pretense? That what you really look for is someone to offer himself as an experimental subject, so you can be sure the drug is safe before you risk it?"

"You misunderstand, your grace."

"Maybe not. Maybe this is what you've been driving toward." I saw myself administering the drug to Noim, saw him falling into convulsions before my eyes as I made ready to bring my own dose to my lips. I pushed the envelope back toward Schweiz. "No. The offer is refused. One appreciates the gen-

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erosity, but one will not experiment on his loved ones, Schweiz."

His face was red. "This implication is unwarranted, your grace. The offer to relinquish one's own share of the drug was made in good faith and at no little cost to one's own plans. But since you reject it, let us return to the original proposition. The two of us will sample the drug, in secrecy, as an experiment in possibilities. Let us find out together what its powers may be and what doors it can open for us. We would have much to gain from this adventure, one is sure."

"One sees what you would have to gain," I said. "But what purpose is there in it for—"

"Yourself?" Schweiz chuckled. Then he rammed me with the barbed hook. "Your grace, by making the experiment you would learn that the drug is safe, you would discover the proper dosage, you would lose your fear of the mind-opening itself. And then, after obtaining a further supply of the drug, you would be properly prepared to use it for a purpose from which your fears now hold you back. You could take the drug together with the only person whom you truly love. You could use it to open your mind to your bondsister Halum and to open hers to you."

THERE is a story they tell children who are still learning the Covenant—about the days when the gods had not yet ceased to walk the world in human form and the first men had not yet arrived on Borthan. The gods at that time did not know they were divine, for they had no mortals about them for comparison, and so they were innocent beings, unaware of their powers, who lived in a simple way. They dwelled in Manneran (this is the source of Manneran's claim to superior holiness, the legend that it was once the home of the gods), ate berries and leaves and went without clothing except in the mild Mannerangi winter, when they threw shawls of animal hide loosely over their shoulders. And there was nothing godlike about them.

One day two of these ungodlike gods decided they would go off to see something of the world. The idea for making such a journey came first to the god whose secret name is Kinnall, now the god who looks after wayfarers. (Yes, he for whom I was named.) This Kinnall invited the goddess Thirga to join him, she whose responsibility now is the protection of those who are in love. Thirga shared Kinnall's restlessness and off they went.

From Manneran they walked west along the southern coast until they came to the shores of the Gulf of Sumar. Then they turned north and passed through Stroin Gap just by the place where the Huishtor Mountains come to an

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end. They entered the Wet Lowlands and stayed there a while, then proceeded to the Burnt Lowlands, which they found less to their liking. Finally they ventured into the Frozen Lowlands, where they thought they would perish of the cold. So they turned south again and this time they also walked to the west and shortly found themselves staring at the inland slopes of the Threishtor Mountains. There seemed no way for them to cross over this mighty range. They followed its eastern foothills south, but could not get out of the Burnt Lowlands and they suffered great hardships, until at last they stumbled upon Threish Gage. They made their way through that difficult pass into the cool and foggy province of Threish.

On their first day in Threish the two gods discovered a place where a spring flowed out of a hillside. The opening in the hillside was nine-sided and the rock surrounding the opening was so bright that it dazzled the eye. It rippled and iridesced and glowed with many colors constantly pulsing and changing, red and green and violet and ivory and turquoise and many more. And the water that came forth was of the same shimmering quality, having in it every color anyone ever had seen. The streem flowed only a short distance this way and then was lost in the waters of a much larger brook, in which all the wondrous colors vanished.

Kinnall said, "We have wandered a long while in the Burnt Lowlands and our throats are dry from thirst. Shall we drink?" And Thirga said, "Yes, let us drink." She kneeled by the opening in the hillside. She cupped her hands, filled them with the glittering water and poured it into her mouth. Kinnall drank also and the taste of the water was so sweet that they thrust their faces right against the flow of the spring, gulping down all they could.

As they did this they experienced strange sensations of their bodies and minds. Kinnall looked toward Thirga and realized that he could see the thoughts within her soul and they were thoughts of love for him. She looked toward him and saw his thoughts as well.

"We are different now," Kinnall said and he did not even need words to convey his meaning, for Thirga understood him as soon as his thought formed.

And she replied, "No, we are not different, but are merely able to understand the use of the gifts we have always had."

And it was true. For they had many gifts and they had never used them before. They could rise in the air and travel like birds; they could change the shapes of their bodies; they could walk through the Burnt Lowlands or the Frozen Lowlands and feel no discomfort; they

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could live without taking in food; they could halt the aging of their flesh and become as young as they pleased; they could speak without saying words. All these things they might have done before coming to the spring, except that they had not known how. Now they were capable of using the skills with which they had been born. They had learned, by drinking the water of the bright spring, how to go about being gods.

EVEN so, they did not yet know that they were gods.

They drank at the wonderful spring again, but it taught them nothing that the first gulp had not already showed them, so they moved onward through Threish. Everything they beheld now was transformed, taking on a jeweled beauty, a magical luminous brilliance, and they were stunned by the wonder of their change. And everything they saw they shared with one another, for their souls were in perfect communion and full harmony.

After some time they remembered the others who lived in Manneran, and flew back to tell them about the spring. The journey took only an instant. All their friends crowded around as Kinnall and Thirga spoke of the miracle of the spring and demonstrated the powers they had mastered. When they were done, everyone in Manneran resolved to go to the spring. A long procession set out through Stroin Gap and the Wet Lowlands and up the eastern slopes of the Threishtors to Threish Gate. Kinnall and Thirga flew above the travelers, guiding them from day to day. Eventually they reached the place of the spring and one by one they drank of it and became as gods. Then they scattered, some returning to Manneran, some going to Salla, some going even to Sumera Borthan or the far continents of Umbis, Dabis and Tribis, since, now that they were as gods, there were no limits on the speed of their travel and they wished to see those strange places. But Kinnall and Thirga settled down beside the spring in eastern Threish and were content to explore one another's souls.

Many years passed and the starship of our forefathers came down in Threish, near the western shore. Men had at last reached Borthan. They built a small town and went about the task of collecting food for themselves. A certain man named Digant, who was among these settlers, ventured deep into the forest in search of meat animals. He became lost and roamed until finally he came to the place where Kinnall and Thirga lived. He had never seen any such as they before, nor they anyone such as he.

"What sort of creatures are you?" he asked.

Kinnall replied, "Once we were

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quite ordinary, but now we do quite well, for we never grow old. We can fly faster than any bird, our souls are open to each other and we can take on any shape we please."

"Why, then you are gods!" Digant cried.

"Gods? What are gods?"

Digant explained that he was a man and had no such powers as theirs, for men must use words to talk and can neither fly nor change their shape. Men grow older with each journey of the world around the sun, until the time of dying comes. Kinnall and Thirga listened with care, comparing themselves to Digant, and when he was done speaking they knew it was true that he was a man and they were gods.

"Once we were almost like men ourselves," Thirga admitted. "We felt hunger and grew old and spoke only by means of words and had to put one foot in front of the other to get from place to place. We lived like men out of ignorance, for we did not know our powers. But then things changed."

"And what changed them?" Digant asked.

"Why," said Kinnall in his innocence, "we drank from that glistening spring and the water of it opened our eyes to our powers and allowed us to become as gods. That was all."

Then Digant's soul surged with excitement, for he told himself that he, too, could drink from the spring and then he would join this pair in godhood. He would keep the spring a secret afterward, when he returned to the settlers on the coast, and they would worship him as their living god and treat him with reverence, or he would destroy them. But Digant did not dare ask Kinnall and Thirga to let him drink from the spring, for he feared that they would refuse him, being jealous of their divinity. So he hatched a scheme to get them away from that place.

Is it true," he asked them, "That you can travel so fast that you are able to visit every part of this world in a single day?"

Kinnall assured him that this was true.

"It seems difficult to believe," said Digant.

"We will give you proof," Thirga said.

She touched her hand to Kinnall's and the two gods went aloft. They soared to the highest peak of the Threishtors and gathered snowflowers there; they descended into the Burnt Lowlands and scooped up a handful of the red soil; in the Wet Lowlands they collected herbs; by the Gulf of Sumar they took some liquor from a fleshtree; on the shores of the Polar Gulf they pried up a sample of the eternal ice; then they leaped over the top of the world to frosty Tibis and began their journey

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through the far continents, so that they might bring back to the doubting Digant something from every part of the world.

THE moment Kinnall and Thirga had departed on this enterprise Digant rushed to the spring of miracles. There he hesitated briefly, afraid that the gods might return suddenly and strike him down for his boldness; but they did not appear and Digant thrust his face into the flow and drank deeply, thinking, *Now I, too, shall be as a god.* He filled his gut with the glowing water, swayed, grew dizzy and fell to the ground. *Is this godhood?* He wondered. He tried to fly and could not. He tried to change his shape and could not. He failed in all these things because he had been a man to begin with and not a god. The spring could not change a man into a god, but could only help a god to realize his full powers.

But the spring gave Digant one gift. It enabled him to reach into the minds of the other men who had settled in Threish. As he lay on the ground, numb with disappointment, he heard a tiny tickling sound in the middle of his mind and paid close heed to it and realized he was hearing the minds of his friends. And he found a way of amplifying the sound so that he could hear everything clearly: yes, and this was the mind of his wife, and this was the mind of his sister, and this was the mind of his sister's husband—Digant could look into any of them and any other mind, reading the innermost thoughts. This is godhood, he told himself. And he probed their minds deeply, flushing out all their secrets. Steadily he increased the scope of his power until every mind at once was connected to his. Forth from them he drew the privacies of their souls, until, intoxicated with his new power, swollen with the pride of his godhood, he sent out a message to all those minds from his mind, saying, "HEAR THE VOICE OF DIGANT. IT IS DIGANT THE GOD THAT YOU SHALL WORSHIP."

When this terrible voice broke into their minds many of the settlers in Threish fell down dead with shock. Others lost their sanity and others ran about in wild terror, crying, "Digant has invaded our minds! Digant has invaded our minds!" And the waves of fear and pain coming out of them were so intense that Digant himself suffered greatly, falling into a paralysis and stupor, though his dazed mind continued to roar, "HEAR THE VOICE OF DIGANT. IT IS DIGANT THE GOD THAT YOU SHALL WORSHIP." Each time that great cry went forth, more settlers died and more lost their reason and Digant, responding to the mental tumults he had caused, writhed and shook in ag-

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ony, wholly unable to control the powers of his brain.

Kinnal and Thirga were in Dabis when this occured, drawing forth from a marsh a triple-headed worm to show to Digant. The bellowings of Digant's mind sped around the world even to Dabis and, hearing those sounds, Kinnall and Thirga left off what they were doing and hurried back to Threish. They found Digant close to death, his brain all but burned out. They found the settlers of Threish dead or mad and they knew at once how this had come to pass. Swiftly they brought an end to Digant's life, so that there would be silence in Threish. Then they went among the victims of the would-be god and raised all the dead and healed all the injured. And lastly they sealed the opening in the hillside with a seal that could not be broken, for it was plain to them that men must not drink of that spring, but only gods, and all the gods had already taken their draughts of it.

The people of Threish fell on their knees before those two and asked in awe, "Who are you?"

And Kinnall and Thirga replied, "We are gods and you are only men." And that was the beginning of the end of the innocence of the gods. And after that time it was forbidden among men to seek ways of speaking mind to mind, because of the harm that Digant had done. And it was written into the Covenant that one must keep one's soul apart from the souls of others, since only gods can mingle souls without destroying one another — and we are not gods.

XII

OF COURSE I found many reasons to postpone taking the Sumaran drug with Schweiz. First, High Justice Kalimol departed on a hunting trip and I told Schweiz that the doubled pressures of my work in his absence made it impossible for me to undertake the experiment just then. Kalimol returned; Halum fell ill; I used my worry over her as the next excuse. Halum recovered; Noim invited Loimel and myself to spend a holiday at his lodge in southern Salla. We came back from Salla; war broke out between Salla and Glin, creating complex maritime problems for me at the Justiciary. And so the weeks went. Schweiz grew impatient. Did I mean to take the drug at all? I could not give him an answer. I did not truly know. But always there burned in me the temptation he had planted there. To reach out, godlike, and enter Halum's soul.

I went to the Stone Chapel, waited until Jidd could see me and let myself be drained. But I kept back from Jidd all mention of Schweiz and his drug, fearing to reveal that I toyed with such dangerous amusements. Therefore the draining was a failure, since I

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had not fully opened my soul to the drainer; and I left the Stone Chapel with a congestion of the spirit, tense and morose. I saw clearly now that I must necessarily yield to Schweiz, that what he offered was an ordeal through which I must pass, for there was no escaping it. He had found me out. Beneath my piety I was a potential traitor to the Covenant. I went to him.

"Today," I said. "Now."

WE NEEDED seclusion. The Port Justiciary maintains a country lodge in the hills, two hours northwest of the city of Manneran, where visiting dignitaries are entertained and treaties of trade negotiated. I knew that this lodge was not currently in use and reserved it for myself for a three-day span. At midday I picked Schweiz up in a Justiciary car and drove quickly out of the city.

The lodge had an excellent steam bath. We scrubbed ourselves vigorously and when we came out we donned loose, comfortable silken robes. I felt frightened and uneasy and began to think that I would suffer some terrible harm out of this evening. Just then I regarded myself as one who was about to undergo surgery from which his chances of recovery were slight. My mood was sullen resignation: I was willing, I was here, I was eager to take the plunge and have done with it.

"Your last chance," Schweiz said, grinning broadly. "You can still back out."

"No."

"You understand that there are risks, though? We are equally inexperienced in this drug. There are dangers."

"Understood," I said.

"Is it also understood that you enter this voluntarily and under no coercion?"

I said, "Why this delay, Schweiz? Bring out your potion."

"One wishes to assure himself that your grace is fully prepared to meet any consequences."

In a tone of heavy sarcasm I said, "Perhaps there should be a contract between us, then, in the proper fashion, relieving you of any liability in case one wishes later to press a claim for damage to the personality—"

"If you wish, your grace. One does not feel it necessary."

"One wasn't serious," I said. I was fidgety now. "Can it be that you're nervous about it, too, Schweiz? That you have some doubts?"

"We take a bold step."

"Let's take it, then, before the moment goes by. Bring out the potion, Schweiz. Bring out the potion."

"Yes," he said.

He gave me a long look, his eyes to mine, and clapped his hands in childlike glee. And laughed in tri-

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umph. I saw how he had manipulated me. Now I was begging him for the drug! Oh, devil, devil!

From his traveling case he fetched the packet of white powder. He told me to get wine. I ordered two flasks of chilled Mannerangi golden from the kitchen and he dumped half the contents of the packet into my flask, half into his. The powder dissolved almost instantly: for a moment it left a cloudy gray wake and then were was no trace of it. We gripped our flasks.

"It should all go down at once," Schweiz said. He gulped his wine and I gulped mine. Then I sat back, expecting the drug to hit me instantly. I felt a faint giddiness, but that was only the wine doing its work in my empty gut.

"How long does it take to begin?" I asked.

Schweiz shrugged. "It will be some while yet."

We waited in silence. Testing myself, I tried to force my mind to go forth and encounter his, but I felt nothing. The sounds of the room becase magnified: the creak of floorboards, the rasping of insects outside the window, the tiny hum of the bright electric light.

"Can you explain," I asked hoarsely, "the way this drug is thought to operate?"

Schweiz answered, "One can tell you only what was told to him. Which is that the potential power to link one mind to another exists in all of us from birth, only we have evolved a chemical substance in the blood that inhibits the power. A very few are born without the inhibitor and these have the gift of reaching minds, but most of us are forever blocked from achieving this silent communication, except when for some reason the production of the hormone ceases of its own accord and our minds open for a while. When this occurs it is often mistaken for madness. This drug of Sumara Borthan, they say, neutralizes the natural inhibitor in our blood—at least for a short time—and permits us to make contact with one another, as we would normally do if we lacked the counteracting substance in the blood. So one has heard."

To this I answered, "We all might be supermen, then, but we are crippled by our own glands?"

Schweiz, gesturing grandly, said, "Maybe it is that there were good biological reasons for evolving this protection against our own powers. Eh? Or maybe not." He laughed.

His face had turned very red. I asked him if he really believed this story of an inhibitory hormone and a counterinhibitory drug and he said that he had no grounds for making judgment.

"Do you feel anything yet?" I asked.

"Only the wine," he said. We waited. We waited. Perhaps it will

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do nothing, I thought, and I will be reprieved. We waited.

At length Schweiz said, "It may be beginning now."

I WAS at first greatly aware of the functioning of my own body: the thud-thud of my heart, the pounding of the blood against the walls of arteries, the movements of fluids deep within my ears, the drifting of corpuscular bodies across my field of vision. I became enormously receptive to external stimuli: currents of air brushing my cheek, a fold of my robe touching my thigh, the pressure of the floor against the sole of my foot. I heard an unfamiliar sound as of water tumbling through a distant gorge. I lost touch with my surroundings, for as my perceptions intensified the range of them also narrowed. I found myself incapable of perceiving the shape of the room, for I saw nothing clearly except in a constricted tunnel, at the other end of which was Schweiz; beyond the rim of this tunnel there was only haze. Now I was frightened and fought to clear my mind, as one may make a conscious effort to free the brain of the muddle caused by too much wine—but the harder I struggled to return to normal perception, the more rapidly did the pace of change accelerate. I entered a state of luminous drunkenness, in which brilliant radiant rods of colored light streamed past my face, and I was certain I must have sipped from Digant's spring. I felt a rushing sensation, like that of air moving swiftly against my ears. I heard a high whining sound that was barely audible at first, but swept up in crescendo until it took on tangibility and appeared to fill the room to overflowing, yet the sound was not painful. The chair beneath me throbbed and pulsated in a steady beat that seemed tuned to some patient pulsation of our planet itself. Then, with no discernible feeling of having crossed a boundary, I realized that my perceptions had for some time been double: now I was aware of a second heartbeat, of a second spurt of blood within vessels, of a second churning of intestines. But it was not mere duplication, for these other rhythms were different, setting up complex symphonic interplays with the rhythms of my own body, creating percussive patterns that were so intricate that the fibers of my mind melted in the attempt to follow them. I began to sway in time with these beats, to clap my hands against my thighs, I saw Schweiz also swaying and clapping and snapping and realized whose bodily rhythms it was I had been receiving. We were locked together. I had difficulty now distinguishing his heartbeat from my own and sometimes, glancing across the table at him, I saw my

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own reddened, distorted face. I experienced a general liquefying of reality, a breaking down of walls and restraints; I was unable to maintain a sense of Kinnall Darival as an individual; I thought not in terms of *he* and *I*, but of *we*. I had lost not only my identity but the concept of self itself.

At that level I remained a long while, until I started to think that the power of the drug was receding. Colors grew less brilliant, my perception of the room became more conventional and I could again distinguish Schweiz' body and mind from my own. Instead of feeling relief that the worst was over, though, I felt only disappointment that I had not achieved the kind of mingling of consciousness that Schweiz had promised.

But I was mistaken.

The first wild rush of the drug was over, yes—yet we were only now coming into the true communion. Schweiz and I were apart but nevertheless together. This was the real selfbaring. I saw his soul spread out before me as though on a table. I could walk up to the table and examine those things that were on it, picking up this utensil, that vase, these ornaments, to study each as closely as I wished.

Here was the looming face of Schweiz' mother. Here was a swollen pale breast streaked with blue veins and tipped by an enormous rigid nipple. Here were childhood furies. Here were memories of Earth. Through the eyes of Schweiz I saw the mother of worlds, maimed and shackled, disfigured and discolored. Beauty gleamed through the ugliness. This was the place of his birth, this disheveled city; these were highways ten thousand years old; these were the stumps of ancient temples. Here was the node of first love. Here were disappointments and departures. Betrayals, here. Shared confidences, here. Growth and change. Corrosion and despair. Journeys. Failures. Seductions. Confessions. I saw the suns of a hundred worlds.

And I passed through the strata of Schweiz' soul, inspecting the gritty layers of greed and the boulders of trickery, the oily pockets of maliciousness, the decaying loam of opportunism. Here was self incarnate; here was a man who lived solely for his own sake.

Yet I did not recoil from the darkness of Schweiz.

I SAW beyond those things. I saw the yearning, the god-hunger in the man, Schweiz alone on a lunar plain, splayfooted on a black shield of rock under a purple sky, reaching up, grasping, taking hold of nothing. Sly and opportunistic he might be, yes, but also vulnerable, passionate, honest beneath all his capering. I could not judge Schweiz harshly. He was

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I. I was he. Tides of self engulfed us both. If I were to cast Schweiz down, I must also cast down Kinnall Darival. My soul was flooded with warmth for him.

I felt him, too, probing me. I erected no barriers about my spirit as he came to explore it. And through his own eyes I saw what he was seeing in me. My fear of my father. My awe of my brother. My love for Halum. My flight into Glin. My choosing of Loimel. My petty faults and my petty virtues. Everything, Schweiz. Look. Look. Look. And it all came back refracted through his soul, nor did I find it painful to observe. Love of others begins with love of self, I thought suddenly.

In that instant the Covenant fell and shattered within me.

Gradually Schweiz and I pulled apart, though we remained in contact some time longer, the strength of the bond ebbing steadily. When it broke at last, I felt a shivering resonance, as if a taut string had snapped. We sat in silence. My eyes were closed. After some long time I looked across the room at Schweiz.

He was watching me, waiting for me. He wore that demonic look of his, the wild grin, the bright-eyed gleam, only now it seemed to me less a look of madness than a reflection of inner joy. He appeared younger now. His face was still flushed.

"I love you," he said softly.

The unexpected words were bludgeons. I crossed my wrists before my face, palms out, protecting myself.

"What upsets you so much?" he asked. "My grammar or my meaning?"

"Both."

"Can it be so terrible to say, *I love you*?"

"One has never—one does not know how to—"

"To react? To respond?" Schweiz laughed. "I don't mean I love you in any physical way. As if that would be so hideous. But no. I mean what I say, Kinnall. I've been in your mind and I liked what I saw there. I love you."

"You talk in 'I,' " I reminded him.

"Why not? Must I deny self even now? Come on—break free, Kinnall. I know you want to. Do you think what I just said to you is obscene?"

"There is such a strangeness about it."

"Oh my world those words have a holy strangeness," said Schweiz. "And here they're an abomination. Never to be allowed to say 'I love you,' eh? A whole planet denying itself that little pleasure. Oh, no, Kinnall, no, no, no!"

"Please," I said faintly. "One still has not fully adjusted to the things the drug did. When you shout at one like that—"

But he would not subside.

"You were in my mind too," he said. "What did you find there?

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Was I so loathsome? Get it out, Kinnall. You have no secrets from me now. The truth. The truth!"

"You know, then, that one found you more admirable than one had expected."

Schweiz chuckled. "And I the same! Why are we afraid of each other now, Kinnall? I told you: I love you! We made contact. We saw there were areas of trust. Now we have to change, Kinnall. You more than I, because you have farther to go. Come. Come. Put words to your heart. Say it.

"One can't."

"Say 'I.' "

"How difficult that is."

"Say it. Not as an obscenity. Say it as if you loved yourself."

"Please."

"Say it."

"I," I said.

"Was that so awful? Come, now. Tell me how you feel about me. The truth. From the deepest levels."

"A feeling of warmth—of affection, of trust—"

"Of love?"

"Of love, yes," I admitted.

"Then say it."

"Love."

"That isn't what I want you to say."

"What, then?"

"Something that hasn't been said on this planet in two thousand years, Kinnall. Now—say it. I—"

"I—"

"Love you."

"Love you."

"I love you."

"I—love—you."

"It's a beginning," Schweiz said. Sweat streamed down his face and mine. "We start by acknowledging that we can love. We start by acknowledging that we have selves *capable* of loving. Then we begin to love. Eh? We begin to love."

XIII

LATER I asked, "Did you get from the drug what you were looking for, Schweiz?"

"Partially."

"How so, partially?"

"I was looking for God, Kinnall, and I didn't quite find Him, but I got a better idea of where to look. What I did find was how not to be alone any more. How to open my mind fully to someone else. That's the first step on the road I want to travel."

"One is happy for your sake, Schweiz."

"Must you still talk to me in that third-person lingo?"

"I can't help myself," I said. I was terribly tired. I was beginning to feel afraid of Schweiz again. The love I bore for him was still there, but now suspicion was creeping back. Was he exploiting me? Was he milking a dirty little pleasure out of our mutual exposures? He had pushed me into becoming a selfbarer. His insistence on my speaking in "I" and

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"me" to him—was that a token of my liberation, was it something beautiful and pure, as he claimed, or was it only a reveling in filth? I was too new to this. I could not sit placidly while a man said, "*I love you*" to me and compelled me to say to him, "*I love you.*"

"Practice it," Schweiz said. "I. I. I. I."

"Stop. Please."

"Is it that painful?"

"It's new and strange to me. I need—there, you see?—I need to slide into this more gradually."

"Take your time, then. Don't let me rush you. But don't ever stop moving forward."

"One will try. *I* will try," I said.

"Good." After a moment he said, "Would you try the drug again, ever?"

"With you?"

"I don't think there's any need for that. I mean with someone like your bondsister. If I offered you some, would you use it with her?"

"I don't know."

"Are you afraid of the drug now?"

I shook my head. "That isn't easy for me to answer. I need time to come to terms with the whole experience. Time to think about it, Schweiz, before getting involved again."

"You've tasted the experience. You've seen that there's only good to be had from it."

"Perhaps. Perhaps."

"Without doubt!" His fervor was evangelical. His zeal tempted me anew.

Cautiously I said, "If more were available I would seriously consider trying it again. With Halum, maybe."

"Good!"

"Not immediately. But in time. Two, three, four moontimes from now."

"It would have to be farther from now than that."

"Why?"

Schweiz said, "This was my entire stock of the drug that we used this evening. I have no more."

"But you could get some if you tried?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, certainly."

"Where?"

"In Sumara Borthan," he said.

WHEN one is new to the ways of pleasure, it is not surprising to find guilt and remorse following first indulgence. So was it with me. In the morning of our second day at the lodge I awoke after troubled sleep, feeling such shame that I prayed the ground to swallow me. What had I done? Why had I let Schweiz goad me into such foulness? Selfbaring! Selfbaring! Sitting with him all night, saying "I" and "me" and "I," and congratulating myself on my new freedom from convention's strangling hand! The mists of day brought a mood of disbelief. Could I have actually opened myself like that? Yes, I must, for with-

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in me now were memories of Schweiz' past, to which I had not had access before. And myself within him, then. I prayed for a way of undoing what I had done. I felt I had lost something of myself by surrendering my apartness. You know, to be a selfbarer is not a pretty thing among us and those who expose themselves gain only a dirty pleasure from it, a furtive kind of ecstasy. I insisted to myself that I had done nothing of that kind, but had embarked rather on a spiritual quest; but even as I put the phrase to myself it sounded portentous and hypocritical, a flimsy mask for shabby motives. I was ashamed, for my sake, for my sons' sakes, for the sake of my royal father and his royal forefathers, that I had come to this. I think it was Schweiz' "*I love you*" that drove me into such an abyss of regret, more than any other single aspect of the evening, for my old self saw those words as doubly obscene, even while the new self that was struggling to emerge insisted that the Earthman had meant nothing shameful, neither with his "*I*" nor with his "*love*." But I rejected my own argument and let guilt engulf me. What had I become, to trade endearments with another man, an Earthborn merchant, a lunatic? How could I have given my soul to him? Where did I stand now that I was so wholly vulnerable to him?

That day I spent mostly alone. I went off into the forest and bathed at a cool pond; then I knelt before a firethorn tree and pretended it was a drainer and confessed myself to it in whispers. Afterward I walked through a brambly woods, coming back to the lodge thorned and smudged. Schweiz asked me if I felt unwell. No, I told him, nothing was wrong. I said little that evening, but huddled in a floating-chair. The Earthman, more talkative than ever – a torrent of buoyant words—launched himself into the details of a grand scheme for an expedition to Sumara Borthan to bring back sacks of the drug, enough to transform every soul in Manneran. I listened without commenting, for everything had become unreal to me and his project seemed no more strange than anything else.

I hoped the ache of my soul would ease once I was back in Manneran and at my desk in the Justiciary. But no. I came into my house and Halum was there with Loimel. They were exchanging clothes with one another and at the sight of them I nearly turned and fled. They smiled warm woman-smiles at me, secret smiles, the token of the league they had formed between themselves all their lives, and in despair I looked from my wife to my bondsister, from one cousin to the other, receiving their mirrored beauty as a double sword in my belly. Those smiles! Those knowing eyes! They

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needed no drug to pull the truths from me.

Where have you been, Kinnall?

To a lodge in the forest, to play at selfbaring with the Earthman.

And did you show him your soul?

Oh, yes, and he showed his.

And then?

Then we spoke of love. I love you, he said, and one replied, I love you.

What a wicked child you are, Kinnall!

Yes. Yes. Where can one hide from his shame?

This silent dialog whirled through my brain in an instant, as I came toward them where they sat beside the courtyard fountain. Formally I embraced Loimel, and formally I embraced my bond-sister, but I kept my eyes averted from theirs, so sharp was my guilt. It was the same in the Justiciary office for me. I translated the glances of the underlings into accusing glares. *There is Kinnall Darival, who revealed all our mysteries to Schweiz of Earth. Look at the Sallan selfbarer slink by us! How can he stand his own reek?* I kept to myself and did my work poorly. A document concerning some transaction of Schweiz' crossed my desk, throwing me into dismay. The thought of facing Schweiz ever again appalled me. It would have been no great chore for me to revoke his residence permit in Manneran, using the authority of the High Justice; poor payment for the trust he showed me, but I came close to doing it, and checked myself only out of a deeper shame even than I already bore.

ON THE third day of my return, when my children too had begun to wonder what was wrong with me, I went to the Stone Chapel to seek healing from the drainer Jidd.

It was a damp day of heavy heat. The soft furry sky seemed to hang in looping folds over Manneran and everything was coated in glistening beads of bright moisture. That day the sunlight was a strange color, almost white, and the ancient black stone blocks of the holy building gave off blinding reflections as though they were edged with prisms. But inside the chapel I found myself in dark, cool, quiet halls. Jidd's cell had pride of place in the chapel's apse, behind the great altar. He awaited me already robed; I had reserved his time hours in advance. The contract was ready. Quickly I signed and gave him his fee. This Jidd was no more lovely than any other of this trade, but just then I was almost pleased by his ugliness, his jagged knobby nose and thin long lips, his hooded eyes, his dangling earlobes. Why mock the man's face? He would have chosen another for himself if he had been consulted. And I was kindly dis-

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posed to him, for I hoped he would heal me. Healers were holy men. *Give me what I need from you, Jidd, and I will bless your ugly face!*

He asked, "Under whose auspices will you drain?"

"The god of forgiving."

He touched a switch. Mere candles were too common for Jidd. The amber light of forgiveness came from some concealed gas jet and flooded the chamber. Jidd directed my attention toward the mirror, instructing me to behold my face, put my eyes to my eyes. The eyes of a stranger looked back at me. Droplets of sweat clustered in the roots of my beard, where the flesh of my cheeks could be seen. *I love you*, I said silently to the strange face in the mirror. Love of others begins with love of self. The chapel weighed on me; I was in terror of being crushed beneath a block of the ceiling. Jidd was saying the preliminary words. There was nothing of love in them. He commanded me to open my soul to him.

I stammered. My tongue turned upon itself and was knotted. I gagged; I choked; I pulled my head down and pressed it to the cold floor. Jidd touched my shoulder and murmured formulas of comfort until my fit softened. We began the rite a second time. Now I traveled more smoothly through the preliminaries and, when he asked me to speak, I said, as though reciting lines that had been written for me by someone else, "These days past one went to a secret place with another. We shared a certain drug of Sumara Borthan that unseals the soul and we engaged in selfbaring together. Now one feels remorse for his sin and would have forgiveness for it."

Jidd gasped, and it is no little task to astonish a drainer. That gasp nearly punctured my will to confess; but Jidd artfully recovered control, coaxing me onward with bland priestly phrases, until in a few moments the stiffness left my jaws and I was spilling out everthing. My early discussions of the drug with Schweiz. (I left him unnamed. Though I trusted Jidd to maintain the secrecy of the draining, I saw no spiritual gain for myself in revealing to anyone the name of my companion in sin.) My taking of the drug at the lodge. My sensations as the drug took hold. My exploration of Schweiz' soul. His entry into mine. The kindling of deep affection between us as our union of spirit developed. My feeling of alienation from the Covenant while under the drug's influence. That sudden conviction of mine that the denial of self which we practice is a catastrophic cultural error. The intuitive realization that we should deny our solitude instead and seek to bridge the gulfs between our-

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selves and others, rather than glorying in isolation. Also I confessed that I had dabbled in the drug for the sake of eventually reaching the soul of Halum; hearing from me this admission of yearning for my bondsister was old stuff to Jidd by now. And then I spoke of the dislocations I had experienced since coming out of my drug trance: the guilt, the shame, the doubt. At last I fell silent. Before me hung the facts of my misdeeds, tangible and exposed and already I felt cleaner for having revealed them. I was willing now to be brought back into the Covenant. I wanted to be purged of my aberration of selfbaring. I hungered to do penance and resume my upright life. I was eager to be healed, I was begging for absolution and restoration to my community. But I could not feel the presence of the god. Staring into the mirror, I saw only my own face, drawn and shallow, the beard in need of combing. When Jidd began to recite the formulas of absolution, they were merely words to me, nor did my soul lift. I was cut off from all faith. The irony of that distracted me: Schweiz, envying me for my beliefs, seeking through the drug to understand the mystery of submission to the supernatural, had stripped me of my access to the gods. There I kneeled, stone knees on stone floor, making hollow responses to Jidd's hollow phrases, while wishing that Jidd and I could have taken the drug together, so there might have been true communion between us. And I knew that I was lost.

"The peace of the gods be with you now," said Jidd.

"The peace of the gods is upon one."

"Seek no more for false succor and keep your self to yourself, for other paths lead only to shame and corruption."

"One will seek no other paths."

"You have bondsister and bondbrother, you have a drainer, you have the mercies of the gods. You need no more."

"One needs no more."

"Go in peace, then."

I went, but not in his kind of peace, for the draining had been a leaden thing, meaningless and trifling. Jidd had not reconciled me to the Covenant—he had simply demonstrated the degree of my separation from it. Unmoved though I had been by the draining, however, I emerged from the Stone Chapel somehow purged of guilt. I no longer repented my selfbaring. Perhaps this was some residual effect of the draining, this inversion of my purpose in going to Jidd, but I did not try deeply to analyze it. I was content to be myself and to be thinking these thoughts. My conversion at that instant was complete. Schweiz had taken my faith from me, but he had given me another in its place.

TO BE CONCLUDED

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THIS SPACE CONTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLISHER AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

MARGUERITE PIAZZA. PHOTOGRAPHED BY BERT STERN

The doctor told me, "Marguerite, you can be alive and ugly, or beautiful and dead."

The day I first noticed the small pink spot on my cheek, I had other things on my mind. The New York papers said, "Marguerite Piazza opens at the Persian Room". I covered the spot with makeup, walked out into the spotlight, and forgot it—forgot everything—in the joy of singing.

It wasn't until the spot began to spread, that I went to a cancer specialist. The day the doctor told me I'd have to have radical face surgery, I was sure my career was over. It was no longer a matter of saving my looks. Just of saving my life.

They kept the mirrors in my hospital room covered for a week. And yet today, thanks to the fantastic skill of the surgeons, I sing in the spotlight again. I let myself be photographed full-face by a famous photographer of glamorous women. And I am alive.

So now you know why I am appealing to you on behalf of the American Cancer Society. To give money. To get regular checkups. And to pay attention to cancer's warning signals.

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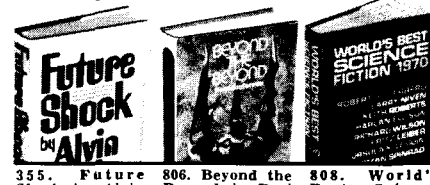

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